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Feeding the Christians

A Thesis Presented

by

James Patrick Redmond

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Feeding the Christians is a work of fiction about Grey Daniels, a young man managing his family's restaurant and choosing to "live under the radar" in his conservative community in Ft. Sackville, Indiana. When Trace, a 17-year-old employee, comes out to Grey, their lives are changed forever by local social constructs. The story is about God, guns, gays, and green beans.

Dedication Page

In Memory of Brent Brand

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Chapter One

Part I

- October 1976 -

Daniels' Diner served beef vegetable soup on Saturdays. Mom and I met Dad there for lunch. When Mom opened the Diner's front door its distinctive *whoosh* released the pressure of its almost airtight glass vestibule allowing the sundrenched October air, parked outside with our car on Fairground Avenue, to follow us inside. Then as Mom and I stepped through the vestibule's second interior door the steeped scent of Saturday's soup-of-the-day welcomed us. I was 6 years old and loved the soup's aroma. As an adult I still do.

We stopped next to the cashier's counter. There my grandma Dixie Daniels sat manning the register reading yet another Harlequin Romance. The steam from her neglected cup of coffee rose in a conjugal vortex with smoke from her nearly neglected Winston cigarette –its scorched tobacco dangled, poised to fall into the black well of an ashtray. Her red lipstick on the cigarette's filter, as well as green guest-checks speared in place by an inverted 6-inch nail on a small block of wood next to the cash register, were the only clues she was present in the Diner. In her mind I'm sure she inhabited some exotic locale. She looked up from her book.

“Grey! Dessa! I didn't expect to see you today.”

Grandma Dixie placed her paperback on the table, pages down, next to her coffee. She stood as I dashed behind the counter to give her a hug and a kiss.

“We’re going shopping for a Halloween costume today, Mom said. “Grey insists Tressler’s will sell out before he gets the one he wants.”

Pulling from our embrace and looking into my eyes Grandma Dixie placed her hands on my shoulders and asked, “Who’s it going to be this year? A Hobo? Casper? Frankenstein?”

“I’m not telling,” I said. “It’s a secret.”

A customer approached the counter.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to be on the lookout for a strange creature standing on my front porch,” she said.

Mom stepped away from the counter allowing the customer to approach.

“Been busy, Dixie?” the customer asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “This gorgeous day has everybody out. How’s everything with you, Jimmy?”

“Can’t complain. Got a full belly,” he said rubbing his stomach. “Nothing like Daniels’ to fill a body up.”

Leaving the cashier’s counter, as Mom and I walked to our table, I heard the cash register’s familiar refrain: first finger punched keys, then the nail rip of a guest-check placed on the stack; the *caching* of the cash register’s bell, followed by the final thud of the cash-drawer springing open. There seemed a sense of security in its every day, every sale repetitiveness: *Punch, rip, caching, thud. Punch, rip, caching, thud.*

Behind the lunch counter, in the kitchen visible through the order-up window, stood Grandpa Collin, his head tilted, giving clear view to the pale yellow Nicotine streak ascending his gray pompadour. His hair resembled the arched back of our neighbor’s old

gray and yellow tom when prepared to strike. The stain bore witness to decades of smoking; a Depression era street-kid, he'd smoked his first cigarette at age 10.

Mom and I had come to meet Dad and to get money. Saturday's at the Diner were more steady than busy so he'd have to time to eat with us. Dad sat in a chair pulled aside the back booth with a group of men who referred to themselves as the Coffee Club. The waitresses called them the CC boys.

Membership in the Coffee Club included local businessmen, farmers, and a car salesman from the Oldsmobile-Buick dealership down the street; their number varied depending on weather or season but they were a constant on Saturdays like beef vegetable soup.

Dad heard our voices, stood and returned his chair to a neighboring table. The CC boys waved at Mom. She smiled and nodded. Dad joined us and together we sat at my favorite table nearest the jukebox.

"So, you two are out running around today," he said, giving my head a quick rub with his hand.

"We're going to get my costume," I replied.

"He insists on the Wicked Witch of the West," Mom said under her breath.

I was wild for the movie the *Wizard of Oz*. Every spring since my first memory of Grandma Dixie and me singing *We're off to See the Wizard*, until she died during my freshman year in high school, we'd watch the annual April broadcast on NBC with our usual trappings: Jiffy-Pop popcorn and ice cold 8 oz. bottles of Coca-Cola. The green-skinned Wicked Witch fascinated me –I often rode my Mom's broom through the house

pretending I could fly. And I was captivated by the tornado, especially since spring was tornado season in southern Indiana.

“Boys don’t dress up as witches,” Dad said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Girls dress up like witches. Boys dress up like monsters. What about Dracula, Frankenstein, or a skeleton?” he asked.

“There’s no use arguing,” Mom said. “I’ve already explained it to him. He insists on the Wicked Witch.”

“We have to hurry up, before they sell it,” I said.

“He’s dead-set,” Mom said, her eyes communicating something with Dad that was beyond my comprehension.

My father sighed; his face registered resignation. To him, I imagine, it wasn’t worth an argument. During my Dad’s childhood with his sister his father had raised them with a harsh hand. As a boy about my age Dad, after refusing to eat spinach one night, was humiliated in front of his older sister and her neighborhood friend when Grandpa Collin grasped the spinach from Dad’s plate with his bare hand, then while holding the back of my father’s head with his other, rubbed the greasy leafy greens into my father’s face.

“God-damnit, you eat what I tell you to eat!” he’d said, wiping his hand afterward on my Dad’s shirt. Grandma Dixie was mortified and rose to stop Grandpa Collin. While trying to pull Grandpa Collin away he backhanded her, knocking her off balance into the china hutch, bloodying her nose. Recounting the story to me, Dad said the only sound he remembered were the dishes rattling on the glass shelves.

Mom, Dad, and I finished our lunch at the Diner. He walked us toward the cashier's counter. Arriving there he lifted me level with the cash register and let me hit the *No Sale* key: *punch, caching, thud*. The cash-drawer sprung open.

"How much do you need?" he asked.

"Ten dollars," I said.

"Ten dollars! Is it custom made?"

"C.J., you let Grey take what he needs; it's been a good day," Grandma Dixie said. She winked at me and playfully slapped Dad on his arm.

"All right, ten dollars. It better be one hell-of-a costume for that kind of money. No wonder Tresslers live in The Heights."

"Thanks, Dad." I gave him a kiss then slammed the cash drawer shut. Grandma Dixie returned to her book. Mom and I left the Diner.

Once outside in the autumn air the faint smell of burning leaves wafted above us. I stood next to the passenger door of our tan and brown Grand Prix waiting for Mom to unlock, fingering the crisp ten-dollar bill in my pocket. Once inside the car I said, "Grandpa Collin didn't come say Hello."

"Well it *is* a good day, isn't it?" Mom said smiling, starting the engine then placing the gearshift in *Drive*.

Chapter Two

- The Phone Call -

It was a Tuesday morning in October during my morning commute to Everglades High School on Miami Beach where I taught 11th grade English Composition when my cell phone rang. It was Mom. Her call established that my life was about to change, again.

“I need to tell you something. Your Dad may have developed Mesothelioma,” she said. My Dad’s health had been declining for several years.

“What?”

“Dr. Vonderbreck sees something. Spots on his lungs. They want to run more tests.”

“When did this happen?”

“Yesterday.”

My Mom told me Doc recently did a scan of Dad’s lungs during a routine checkup, a component of ongoing rehabilitation following surgery on his left lung he’d had in July. Nothing appeared during the operation but now it seemed something meriting concern had surfaced –Cancer. Mesothelioma was a death sentence. I’d seen the commercials on TV, lawyers advertising an opportunity to sue for millions “if you or a loved one are diagnosed with the disease.”

“They want to send him to the VA hospital in Marion, Illinois. They’ve scheduled an appointment for Monday, October 17th,” she said.

“That’s Cameron’s birthday.”

“Yes, I know. His 21st.” Cameron was my only brother, born when I was a freshman in high school and 8 months after Grandma Dixie died of stage four lung cancer.

“It’s hard to believe my baby brother is going to be 21. What happened to that little kid with the bowl cut hair and big smile?”

“Right now he’s driving me nuts,” Mom replied.

“Do you think I should come back? For the tests?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do. Normally I’d say no. But so much has happened. Do you think you could?”

“I can try. I’ve got days,” I said. “Let me talk to my principal.”

“You know, if your Dad has Mesothelioma I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Let’s just take it one step at a time.”

My Mom had never been one to worry. She was strong. Faced the world head-on. But the last few years helping my father fight for his health had broken her.

“If I needed you to come back, to help manage the restaurant, do you think you could take a leave of absence from school? Would they hold your job? I’m afraid things could get serious quick; I’m sure the Family Medical Leave Act would cover you. Clinton did that you know? His law. I wish he was still president.”

“I suppose I could. But let’s not think the worst yet,” I said.

After hanging up from Mom, I again felt that familiar anxiety building in my chest. Ten years earlier, before quitting the restaurant, before moving to Miami Beach and returning to college, I had my first panic attack. I’d suffered anxiety even as a little

kid –the symptoms manifesting in abdominal pain after being forced to take basketball lessons at the local YMCA. Then as a young man and facing uncertainty about my future, my life in limbo, the anxiety returned. It felt like a heart attack, an anvil on my chest. I was driving when it occurred and forced to pull into a convenience mart. Pale and sweating I went inside. The kind woman behind the counter called Mitchell’s Ambulance Service then gave me an aspirin. I was rushed to the Emergency Room, my car left behind in the store parking lot. At Mercy Memorial Hospital an Electrocardiogram was conducted. I passed. No heart problems. It was anxiety, Doc Vonderbreck said. “Are you experiencing stress in your life?”

“You have no idea, Doc,” I replied.

This day, by the time I arrived at Everglades High, I was in the beginning stages of yet another anxiety attack. I never made it to the front office to sign it. I barely made it to my colleague’s classroom. When she saw my face she knew to get help. She sat me in her desk chair and then left to find the assistant principal. By the time they returned I was hyperventilating. Somehow they both calmed me down.

“You need to go home,” my A.P. said. “Is there someone we can call?”

“No. No one. Just let me sit here a moment.”

I eventually caught my breath, gathered myself enough to tell them about my phone conversation with Mom, that my Dad may have lung Cancer. Tests were being scheduled. Emotions had overtaken me and I’d reached my limit. I apologized for scaring them and agreed I needed to go home. Somehow, yet again, I had to get a grip on my future. I knew eventually I’d have to return to Ft. Sackville. I assured them I could drive home safely and that I’d call as soon as I arrived there.

Once I arrived at my condo, having pulled myself together on the way, I realized my panic attack at school had been some sort of release. I called Mom, told her what happened and that I'd make arrangements at school the next day to request of leave of absence.

Chapter Three

- Prodigal Son -

It was the second time I found myself in a U-Haul. I was returning to Indiana, alone. My mother needed me. Dad was ill.

Driving north on the Florida Turnpike with ten years of my Miami Beach life in boxes branded with a Sharpie stowed behind me, I knew two very different worlds were about to collide. I had changed. Ft. Sackville had not. It was still a small town. How would I be received? Since I'd left the restaurant it had become common knowledge that my parents, owners of Daniels' Family Buffet -a Sunday favorite for the after-church crowd- had a gay son.

My first time in a U-Haul was with my mother in 1973. She was a frightened 24-year-old girl who had never driven a 17-foot paneled truck. As she drove east on I-70 her thoughts kept looping over the same questions: how-in-the-hell did *she* end up in Denver, in an abusive marriage? Her only possessions, our only possessions, secured by a solitary Master Lock fastened to the handles on the truck's rear lift-gate, a lock that could easily be snapped with a bolt cutter at a roadside motel or when stopping for gas -if she could find gas. That summer witnessed the nation's worst oil crisis ever -service stations closed, fuel lines for miles, signs announcing "No Gas Today." All of this plus me, her four-year-old brown haired, blue eyed boy standing on the bench-seat beside her. She'd never done anything like it: packing up, leaving, and striking out on her own. Hers had been a small town, daughter-of-a-coal-miner life. She'd never lived anywhere other than Hartwell, Indiana. She was determined to have a future. For the both of us.

Later in my life, as a young man, she told me that during our trek east she'd thought Kansas would never end, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing there. It went on for miles." I thought my

mother was the strongest, most beautiful lady in the world, her brown hair, and hazel eyes. Her smile. I remember singing songs with her, “I Got You Babe” by Sonny and Cher. She made our lives an adventure. To this day she regrets having not taken my biological father’s new set of Ping golf clubs -kept ceremoniously stowed in their bedroom- when she left him that July morning. Hers was a totally covert operation after he went to work in which every room in the apartment was emptied, except the master bedroom. “Driving through Kansas I could’ve at least thrown a golf club out the window at each mile marker to entertain myself –the bastard!”

A few months after returning to Indiana our future found her when she fell in love with C.J. Daniels. C.J. adopted me and became my Dad the following year, after Mom divorced my biological father. My little brother Cameron was born nine years later.

My mother announced she was pregnant with my little brother Cameron in the spring of my 8th grade year. Everyone was thrilled except me. I’d been the only child until then. I had no idea how my life was going to change; just that it was, indeed, going to change.

On the night of her announcement we ate dinner at the Diner. Having told me the news at home earlier in the day, I couldn’t wait to see Aunt Charlene and Grandma Dixie’s reaction when they found out. Grandma Dixie was battling lung cancer so I figured the news would make her happy, she was certain to yell and scream with excitement. Grandpa Collin would have no reaction. He probably wouldn’t leave the kitchen grill long enough to hear the news.

When Mom and Dad told Aunt Charlene and Grandma Dixie they each began to cry. It wasn't the reaction I had expected. After all, it was my life that would be upended! Why were they so upset? Afterward, during the car ride home, I asked Mom and Dad why Aunt Charlene and Grandma Dixie reacted the way they did.

"Well," Dad began, "It's a long story. Your Aunt Charlene cannot have children. She had a female issue several years ago that required surgery. Her tears were a mix of joy and sorrow, I suppose. She may feel she's missed out. The same could be said for your grandmother."

"Why would Grandma Dixie feel she missed out?" I asked. She had you and Aunt Charlene." The idea of Grandma Dixie not living long enough to see my baby brother never occurred to me. I didn't know she was going to die. She had bad days, days when she didn't show up for work at the restaurant. But when she did show up she smiled and seemed happy. Just a week before we'd watched *The Wizard of Oz* together.

"Do you remember taking flowers to the cemetery on Memorial Day?" Mom asked.

"Yes."

"Remember Grandpa Collin and Grandma Dixie's headstone? The other name on engraved on it?" Dad said.

"Yeah, William. He was your little brother that died."

"Yes, he was. Sometimes, Grey, the death of a baby is hard for parents to overcome, especially for a mother. I'm sure mom and Charlene's reaction was sparked by their feelings and memories."

“Do they think something is going to happen to Mom’s baby?”

“No. That isn’t it,” Mom said. “Naturally I have to be careful. Having a baby at 38 is a bit riskier than when I had you. Dixie and Charlene are happy, very happy. It’s just they each have some sadness associated with the birth of babies. They don’t think anything will go wrong. They’re thrilled for us.”

After arriving home, lying in my bed, I thought about the rest of the story I’d been told during the car ride home, the events that lead to my Dad’s little brother’s death. I thought about Grandma Dixie sitting under the fluorescent light of her unadorned kitchen on 9th Street, her energy depleted from having worked the cash register during a day shift at the Diner. Perhaps her day had begun before sunrise when she and the rest of the household awakened from their cold winter night’s slumber to the ever-present draft whispering in each room of the two-story, post world war home Grandpa Collin bought a few years after buying the restaurant. Grandpa Collin, I was sure, had risen earlier, dressed and left for the restaurant to log receipts with the night manager and prepare for Saturday’s breakfast rush. I envisioned Aunt Charlene, the oldest, home from Indiana University on Thanksgiving Break, sound asleep in her room, and my Dad staying overnight at his best friend’s house doing what typical 17-year-old boys do.

The day before Grandpa Collin had made it clear to Aunt Charlene and Dad that they must report for work at the Diner by 10:30 in the morning. Surprisingly, Grandma Dixie thought, Charlene had not returned to Bloomington even though technically

Thanksgiving was over. Aunt Charlene hated working for Grandpa Collin and therefore avoided it at all costs. Staying for the holiday weekend was unusual for her.

For Grandma Dixie every day must have seemed like a never-ending task, her life operating 24 hours a day just like the Diner. Restaurant life added to her chores with greasy aprons and towels to be washed and folded for the next day's business. She could not fall behind on laundry or preparing menus.

Placing her white Royal typewriter on the kitchen table, using seven carbon copies at a time, every week she typed the fifty menus needed for the restaurant, slipping each one into its brown vinyl cover with gold embossed lettering on the front welcoming customers to *Daniels' Diner*. Today however, she simply ran out of time. Just before 11am she changed from her housedress into something more suitable for the public, fixed her hair and added just a dollop of makeup to her olive complexion. It seemed now, in her 9th month, she was in fact glowing, her skin radiant, and her chestnut hair shiny like the mare that pulled the Nuggett Milk Wagon when she was a kid. Any day now could be *the* day, yet Collin insisted she man the cash register during lunch rush; she enjoyed getting out of the house for a few hours to see and talk with customers. In Ft. Sackville everyone knew everybody.

Perhaps the day had been busy at the Diner, people out and about enjoying the holiday weekend. After the day's rush she'd gone to the Post Office to mail bills then grocery shopping at Wollard's. She wanted to be home when Aunt Charlene and Dad returned for their afternoon break from the Diner. Aunt Charlene and Dad could unload her groceries since it'd become a balancing act for Grandma Dixie to navigate the back porch stairs; the handrail offered fragile stability and support, she could no longer carry

things up or down. She didn't remember having been so big with Charlene and C.J. Having a husband, two children, and a restaurant to worry about had taken, it seemed, precious space in her brain for memory. *Thank goodness for Charlene and C.J.*

After supper had been fixed and cleared she felt she could breathe again, alone for the time being –Charlene and C.J. had gone out for the night– and hopefully Collin would not wake her when he came home. Usually, after a busy day, he would stay late then stop for a drink at the bar next door to the Diner –although it was never one drink.

The evening was hers. Noticing her ankles and fingers were swollen she sat down at the kitchen table. It was getting harder to be on her feet all day. She looked at the battered typewriter sitting there on the kitchen table and thought about finishing the menus, but with her puffy fingers she knew it'd be a struggle. Tonight she would rest with a cup of coffee.

Collin staggered through the back door a little after 11pm. Dixie was still sitting with her feet propped up in a second kitchen chair reading the *Ft. Sackville Sentinel* when he entered.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Collin said, his baritone voice splattering the kitchen like hot grease.

“My ankles are swollen,” Dixie said quietly. “I've been on my feet all day. Look at my hands.”

“What the hell you think I've been doing all goddamn day? We were swamped. Francine didn't show up second shift; I was in the kitchen all night.” He spied the typewriter and the unfinished menus before turning his heated eyes to Dixie.

“Collin, I haven’t had time.”

“God-damnit, Dixie, I need those tomorrow!”

“Well then you’re going to have to get someone else. Ask Charlene. She’ll do them in the morning. Take the typewriter with you. ”

Collin backhanded her across the face with a back-alley force so powerful she tumbled out of the kitchen chair onto her stomach. Grandma Dixie’s world went black. Sprawled facedown and spread-eagle on the linoleum, she howled from piercing pain.

Blood seeped between her legs and mixed with her overturned coffee into a puddle on the black and white checkered linoleum floor.

When she awoke, Dixie didn’t remember how she’d gotten to the hospital. She did remember pain. A lot of pain.

As she scooted herself back with her forearms, lifting her herself against the hospital bed’s headboard, her body felt as if all her internal organs had been ripped from her. Collin and the doctor stood beside her bed.

“I want to see my baby,” she said, trying to position pillows behind her.

“Mrs. Daniels, I’m sorry.” Doc Vonderbreck’s eyes said what he couldn’t. Doctor Alfred Vonderbreck II was a young, fresh-faced energetic Indiana University medical school student completing his residency at Mercy Memorial in Ft. Sackville and the son of Doctor Alfred Vonderbreck I, a fishing buddy of Grandpa Collin.

“I *want* to see my baby,” she repeated.

“Doc, let her see the baby,” Grandpa Collin demanded.

“Mr. Daniels, may I have a word with you in the hall?” Doc Vonderbreck asked. Turning back toward Grandma Dixie he said, “Mrs. Daniels, a nurse will be here momentarily.”

Leaving the hospital room, the door closed behind Collin and Doc. From her bed Dixie could hear her Doc Vonderbreck’s whispered voice bounce off the sterile walls and floor of the hall.

“Mr. Daniels, if she wants to see her baby you’re going to show her. I will not. She has suffered enough.”

“Listen, little Al, you stick to medicine. You don’t know anything about my wife or her suffering. Now go and get the goddamn baby.” Collin’s familiar voice again demanded.

“Mr. Daniels, with all due respect, I think it’s best she not see the baby until funeral arrangements and preparations have been made.”

“It’s really none of your damned business is it? Look, we can do this one of two ways: either you get the baby for my wife or I make a call to your father and have him clear up this misunderstanding. He won’t be happy that a patient is complaining about his son.”

“Sir, I don’t think it’s necessary to involve my father.”

“If you do your job it won’t be. Otherwise I’m sure your dad will do the right thing. Remember, I’ve raised a boy. Your dad and I see eye-to-eye on a lot of things.”

Hours seemed to pass before Dixie heard Collin’s heavy footsteps nearing her door. When it opened he brought into the room their stillborn son wrapped in a blue blanket.

Her son, in *his* hands, she thought.

Behind Collin were Charlene and C.J., their heads hanging, cheeks tear-streaked. For a moment she wondered how long they had been waiting to see her before she felt hot tears sting her eyes. Her heart aching far worse than her body, she held out her hands as Collin placed the blue bundle in her arms. Silently she cradled him, placing his cold, miniature hands in hers, feeling each tiny finger. His hair was coal black just like a Daniels but his skin was olive, like hers. She could tell he had her eyes even though his were closed. Her baby was more *her* than *him*.

“William Lee,” she spoke softly as if trying not to wake the infant. “After my brother. His name is William Lee.” Her brother William Lee had been killed in World War II. They never found his body.

Dad said after his little brother’s funeral no one ever mentioned him again. For a year, maybe a little longer, he said he’d often hear Grandma Dixie crying behind the locked bathroom door. But he never heard Grandpa Collin say he was sorry.

Dad stepped into the shadows of my bedroom. Lines from the dusk-to-dawn security light outside sifted through the mini-blinds, striping his silhouette like a prisoner’s jumpsuit.

“Grey, are you still awake? Get some sleep, son. It’s been a big day. Your mother wants to go to church tomorrow.”

“Dad, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Did Grandpa Collin really hit Grandma Dixie? Did he knock her out of her chair on purpose?”

“Yes. He did.”

“Why?”

“Who’s to say, Grey. People sometimes do irrational things they later regret.”

“Does Grandpa Collin regret what he did?”

“More than you know, Grey. Now get some sleep, son”

Dad turned to walk away.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I’m happy Mom’s having a baby.”

“Me too, Grey. Goodnight.”

Thirty-six years had passed since that U-Haul trip with Mom and when she met Dad. Twenty-six had passed since *my* baby brother was born. Yet my U-Haul felt hauntingly familiar. My thoughts kept looping over the same questions: *How am I going to do this? How do I go back? Does Cam realize what’s happening? Is Dad dying?* My mother had always been a strong woman, even when frightened. But during that morning phone call to me in Miami Beach I could sense panic in her voice.

Chapter Four

- The Jukebox -

Driving north on I-75 through southern Georgia seemed comparable to Mom's experience driving through Kansas: desolate. It was certainly uninviting. I at last understood the dullness of driving cross-country in a moving truck and my mother's boredom during the trek to Indiana from Colorado. Like her I had nothing to throw out the window at each mile marker to entertain myself. Unlike her I was not angry or abused, just apprehensive. So, I flipped on my U-Haul's third world radio. I got static. Scanning through the stations my choices were limited: bad country music or Southern Baptist talk radio. I settled on one static free station. At first the voice coming from the speakers sounded as if he might be a National Public Radio host. He wasn't. According to the guest being interviewed there was a particular breed of Christian demagnetizing the moral compass of our country, those that cherry-picked certain scripture to meet their individual, egocentric needs: Cafeteria Christians, a self-aggrandizing, entitled lot. "Those Christians," he added, "have been deceived by Satan's handiwork." The speaker stood firmly in his belief that *all* scripture was God's law. It must be followed to the letter. Stoning; killing those of a different religion; not letting one species of cattle graze with another -the latter being a misguided attempt at metaphor, I thought. He used Leviticus and Deuteronomy to back him up. So did the host. They were taking callers. I flipped the station.

My next selection landed on Creedence Clearwater Revivals' *Proud Mary*. The song reminded me of the jukebox from the Diner –the restaurant in which I grew up. The

jukebox eventually became mine and was now padded and secured in the rear of my U-Haul. When opening Daniels' Family Buffet after closing the Diner, neither Grandpa nor Dad had wanted the jukebox in the new restaurant. When I arrived home from school one day during my 6th grade year, I found the jukebox sitting in my bedroom. Dad had rescued it in the move and given it to me.

Daniels' Diner was a two-generation legacy owned by Grandpa Collin and managed by Dad. Grandpa Collin bought the Diner in 1951.

Before being allowed to stay home alone I ate supper with my parents at the Diner most evenings. Afterwards they'd sit, drink coffee, and talk to Grandma Dixie and Grandpa Collin. We never left early, always the last to leave. There was nothing to do other than play the jukebox, or help the janitor, Earl, mop the floor. He smelled like bleach water and he looked like his mop.

At the jukebox, slipping my dime into its coin slot then making my selection - first a letter then a number - I watched the 45's circle to my choice. The Ferris wheel of records paused just before the mechanical arm picked mine and placed it on the turntable. Watching through the framed glass window was my favorite part. When the needle hit the record there was a scratching sound then music. I knew A5 by heart:

"You know, every now and then I think you might like to hear something from us nice and easy. But you see, we never ever do nothin' nice and easy. We always do it nice and rough. But we're gonna take the beginning of this song and do it easy. Then we're gonna

do the finish rough. This is the way we do, Proud Mary. Rollin' on the river. Listen to the story now."

As I sang with Ike and Tina Turner Mom sat at the table and smiled. Dad was too busy talking to Grandma and Grandpa. They didn't even notice. I saw Tina on TV once. She wore a dress made of orange fringe. Before *Proud Mary* I'd only seen fringe on the outer edges of Grandma Dixie's bathroom rugs. When Tina danced the fiery tassels of her dress leapt from her body and twirled about. I imagined, dancing there in front of the jukebox, that I was wearing fringe. When the song finished the needle stuck. It's scratching repeated: over, over, over. I wanted to continue spinning, my fringe twirling, but Grandpa Collin got up, walked toward me and unplugged the jukebox. Its lights faded with the scratching sound.

I just stood there. Embarrassed by his scowl. It'd be a long time before the jukebox would be plugged in again.

After we left the Diner, in the car Mom turned to me in the backseat, her arm stretched over and behind the front seat of our Grand Prix. She asked if I ever considered taking basketball lessons. "Your cousins play church league, Grey, wouldn't you like to also? With lessons you could beat them."

"No. I don't like basketball."

"But you've never tried."

“Yes I have! During gym. Denny and Josh make fun of me.”

“Well see, with lessons you could show them a thing or two. Besides, your Dad and I’ve signed you up. They’re at the Y. You can walk over after school. By the time I’m finished with work lessons will be over.”

The YMCA was an ancient three-story building near Main Street. It smelled like Janitor Earl. I had taken swim lessons there reaching level *minnow*. The pool was in the basement. Near the diving board a fat metal pipe extended from the wall then curved out and over the deep end. It looked similar to, I imagined, the Michelin Man’s bathtub faucet. I never saw water come out. When turned on it must have filled the pool in no time.

To change into swim trunks I had to undress in the men’s locker room. I hid in the corner if other guys were there or boys that I knew. Most often I went to the toilet stall to change. Basketball lessons would mean changing into basketball shorts.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes. You’ll have fun. Classes are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4:00-5:00. The coach is expecting you.”

She glanced at Dad then turned, her hand lightly brushing his right shoulder as she faced forward.

Dejected, I burrowed into the back seat. At least I had the weekend to invent my plan and plot my Y revolt. In the meantime I’d practice my twirl. The thing is I never had to plot or plan anything. My body did it for me. A few weeks into practice I began to experience severe abdominal cramps, often finding myself doubled over in pain on the

basketball floor. When Doc Vonderbreck couldn't figure out what was wrong Dad let me quit basketball lessons. Soon after my stomach cramps went away.

After C.C.R.'s *Proud Mary* I lost the radio station signal. The static seemed to also repeat: over, over, over. I switched off the radio. Georgia appeared to go on forever and it seemed I'd never get through the state. I thought about the talk radio station and the guest using the term 'Cafeteria Christian.' My family still belonged to Wabash Valley Baptist Church in Ft. Sackville. We were more 'Christmas Christians' than 'Cafeteria Christians' –we only attended on holidays. Sunday's were the busiest day at the Diner and continued to be at Daniels' Family Buffet. Grandpa Collin, Grandma Dixie, and Dad needed to be at the restaurant instead. Soon I'd be facing the Sunday crowd as general manager just as I'd done when beginning my restaurant career following my sophomore year in college.

After twenty-nine years in business Grandpa Collin closed the Diner and opened Daniels' Family Buffet –a 300-seat behemoth in the former IGA grocery store four doors down on Fairground Avenue. Nine years after opening Daniels' Family Buffet my Dad, having been general manager of both restaurants since returning from the Navy, bought the Buffet when Grandpa Collin retired.

After graduating from high school I enrolled in Ft. Sackville Community College. I declared my major in Business Administration simply because three of my friends did

the same. I had no idea what I wanted to study or what I'd do once I graduated. Ft. Sackville Community College was a stepping-stone to one of the larger state universities. I wanted to attend Indiana University in Bloomington like Aunt Charlene but in the back of my mind I somehow knew I'd end up working at the Buffet. After Dad bought it from Grandpa Collin my sophomore year of college I dropped out and went to work there. Grandpa Collin was not happy about the little boy that once twirled to *Proud Mary* in front of the jukebox becoming a man and managing what he still considered to be *his* restaurant. And he was pissed when the power he once wielded over his family, my Dad in particular, shifted the year Daniels' celebrated its 40th anniversary.

After Grandma Dixie died of cancer during my freshman year of high school, Grandpa Collin remained a widower for almost a year. Just shy of the first anniversary of her death he married The Other Woman, Jacqueline. The one Mom and Dad had spotted him with behind a row of tall pines near Dumes Pond while Grandma Dixie, who lay unconscious in her bed, fought a losing battle against stage four lung cancer.

It was late when Mom and Dad left her bedside for the night; it was the night before Grandma Dixie died. Her youngest sister Kay Ann, a nurse at the Indiana University Medical Center in Indianapolis was staying the night to care for her. On their way home my parents decided to pick up fresh doughnuts from Sal's Bakery on Oak Street for the morning's breakfast. Afterwards, when they pulled from the bakery's lot onto Oak they saw Grandpa Collin's truck racing down the street, flashing his headlights

at the car ahead of him. It was Jackie in her car. Mom and Dad, keeping their distance, followed them. Dad said he knew the moment both cars turned south onto River Road his dad was meeting The Other Woman. A few miles down the road, when both cars turned right onto the gravel lane of Dumes Pond, Mom and Dad went straight. Feeling they were a safe distance away, Dad parked alongside the road and then walked back toward and down the lane to the pond. Once there, he saw his dad and Jackie sitting in the cab of his father's beat up blue GMC truck. The next night, after the restaurant closed -- the employees gone, having finished their duties -- Dad confronted Grandpa Collin.

It was Dad's day off. Typically he stopped by the restaurant after closing to check the day's receipts and to catch up on the day's events. As always Dad parked in the side lot and entered through the front door. Walking across the dining room he spotted Grandpa Collin sitting at the table just beyond the restaurant office, tallying guest check numbers against the register's customer totals. Dad stopped at the center waitress station, poured himself a cup of coffee, and joined Grandpa Collin.

"Dessa and I were with Mom last night. You should have been home with her. Kay Ann thinks she could pass any day." Dad said.

"I had to work last night. Somebody has to run this goddamned place. We can't all take days off. Besides, those inside rounds needed to be cut and prepped for Swiss Steak today."

"Were you here late?" You should've said something; I'd have come to help. Or done it this morning."

"No. You spend time with your mother."

"What time did you get out?"

“What the hell is this, a cross examination? I don’t know what time I left,”

Grandpa Collin said, looking over the rim of his eyeglasses.

Dad paused.

“I saw you, Dad.”

“What do you mean, you saw me?” The adding machine began totaling numbers.

“Damn-it, C.J., I’m trying to get these figures together.”

Grandpa Collin hit the erase key and began again.

Dad sipped his coffee.

“Dessa and I saw you following that woman. I saw you with her at Dumes Pond.”

Grandpa Collin stopped. He looked up from his adding machine, leaned across the table nearer to Dad’s face, eye level, and said, “You and Dessa didn’t see anything.”

“Yes, Dad, we did.”

Grandpa Collin slammed his fist on the table sending stacks of green guest checks sliding onto the floor.

“God-dammit, I’m telling you, you didn’t see anything. You’re sticking your nose where it don’t belong.”

“Dad, do you remember what you did at the Diner when I was 10 years old? One of the nights I was there with you? After closing? It was late; two cars pulled up in front and parked. You went to the kitchen and got your gun. Before you went outside you walked me to the front door of the vestibule, gave me keys to it, and told me to lock it behind you. I’ll never forget it. You told me those men were there to kick your ass, that if it looked like you were winning I was to keep the door locked. But if it looked like you

were losing, I should unlock the door. Do you have any idea how fucking scared I was? I watched you pull a gun on those men.”

“What in the hell’s that got to do with anything?”

“You’ve been fucking around with waitresses and other men’s wives your entire married life. Could you please just once, stop? Let Mom die with dignity?”

Grandpa Collin stood, walked around the table to my father’s side. Dad stood.

“Listen, you little son-of-a-bitch,” Grandpa Collin said, his back erect and legs rooted, “My marriage to your mother is none of your goddamn business. You understand me? You need to remember, this is *my* restaurant and your mother is *my* wife. If you don’t like *my* world or what I do in it you’re welcome to get your ass out.”

Dad wasn’t sure if words would turn to fists. It had before. He remembered being 18 years old and fighting his father in the front living room of their house on 9th Street; he remembered his mother screaming for them to stop; he remembered his father’s punch to his gut, the final one that sent him into a fetal position on the living room floor; he remembered his dad laughing, calling him a pussy; his father’s footsteps leaving and the front door slamming behind him. The next day Dad joined the Navy.

Dad backed away from Grandpa Collin, unable to turn away from him. Later Dad said it was the first time he really saw his father for who he was –just a man.

Grandma Dixie died in her sister’s arms that night.

Saturdays I opened the restaurant. My shift lasted until 5pm and then Dad came in and closed so I could have the evening off. While growing up Dad was forced by Grandpa Collin to work in the restaurant; his only reprieve came during the four years he served in the Navy during Viet Nam. Dad once said that fighting in Viet Nam was safer than working for Grandpa Collin. When Dad returned to Ft. Sackville he willingly began working at the restaurant again, intending to do so until he found something better. He says he did – my mother and me. Before Dad knew it he had a family to support. Daniel's Diner, then Daniels' Family Buffet, became his life just as it had been Grandpa Collin's life. And for the first time the restaurant was truly his. Over the course of the next two years together he and I made small, incremental changes. Business picked up and Grandpa Collin watched from the sidelines.

The restaurant prepared to celebrate its 40th anniversary in November and receive an award from the Ft. Sackville Chamber of Commerce honoring Daniels' for its local philanthropy and community involvement, beginning first with recognition that Daniels' Diner was the genesis of my family as local restaurateurs and then acknowledgment of the restaurant's current, larger incarnation as Daniels' Family Buffet. Two weeks before the big celebration, on a Saturday morning, Grandpa Collin came in as soon as the restaurant opened to sit and drink coffee with the CC boys and later have lunch with the kitchen staff. He arrived just as the taxi cab driver was dropping off Gladys; she was always the first customer of the day.

At 10:30am every day a yellow cab brought Gladys to Daniels' Family Buffet. Regulars watched through the Buffet's large plate glass window as she opened the taxi door and pulled her petite frame from the backseat while the driver retrieved her folded walker from the trunk and slipped it over his forearm. Escorted by the cabbie through double door entrance, she gripped his free arm tightly with one hand while carrying her empty water pitcher -- the snap lid kind found in hospitals -- in the other.

Once inside, he unfolded the walker and placed it in front of her. After getting her positioned with the walking aid he left. And every time Gladys watched him walk away, get in his cab, and circle out of the parking lot back to Fairground Avenue -- his red taillights signaling the all clear. Only then would she lift her walker with both hands, securing the water pitcher atop one handle grip, and defiantly carry the walking aid -- its green tennis ball feet never touching the floor -- down the pathway to the buffet and around the iron handrail, to a table three rows behind the Salad Bar, the same table every day. Gladys would sit her pitcher on the table then place the walker next her chair and head to the racked dinner plates. Our waitresses knew to fill the pitcher with water --not for dining but to go. An hour and a half later her cabbie would return.

One day before the noon rush I decided to sit with her and drink a Pepsi.

"Gladys, I never see you with anyone. Where's your family?"

"No family," she said.

She reminded me of the gray catbirds I often saw around my grandmother's bird feeder --rather unkempt, dark eyes that moved side to side. And like those birds she had a splash of vibrant color barely seen.

"You were never married?"

“Why, oh yes! To Henry for fifty-six years.”

“What happened to him?”

“Well,” she began, “we’d just finished breakfast at the kitchen table and I was clearing the dishes when he told me he was going to mow the yard. It wasn’t a big yard but enough so that in July he liked to mow early in the morning to beat the noon sun. Next thing I heard was the kitchen storm door shut behind him, not long after that the mower engine. I’d filled the sink with water and just added the soap when I saw him pass by the kitchen window pushing the fool thing.”

“Oh no, Gladys! Don’t tell me. He didn’t?”

“He did. That summer heat got him. Standing there washing dishes I heard in the distance the mower engine running but Henry never passed the window again.”

“I’m so sorry, Gladys.”

“Yes sir, I pulled the curtains back on the window to get a better look and saw him face down in the yard, the lawn mower sitting there idling just inches from him.”

“I can’t imagine what you thought.”

“I can tell you exactly what I thought. I thought: *NOW who-in-the-hell am I going get to mow my yard?*”

I almost choked on my Pepsi.

Was she telling me the truth?

Sherry the waitress saw my reaction and brought an extra napkin to our table along with the filled water pitcher.

Gladys winked at me and took a bite of her pork chop. I told her I’d talk to her later, got up, and headed toward the office.

I was sitting at the office desk on the phone taking a catering order, the door open, when I saw Grandpa Collin join the employees after leaving the CC boys' table. The employees ate lunch while grandpa Collin drank his coffee and smoked one cigarette after another. This day, however, the employees were not their usual lively selves. Grandpa Collin kept looking into the office, watching me. I sensed something was up. When the employee break was over, he left.

Later, after finishing the order and my lunch, I walked into the kitchen and saw Martha sitting at her stainless steel prep table cutting onions. She was crying.

"Take a break, Martha. Looks like those onions are getting to you." Her eyes were bloodshot, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She didn't respond.

"Martha, are you OK?"

No answer. I pulled a chair from the corner near her and sat down.

"What's going on?" I asked again.

"I don't want involved," she said.

Martha had worked for my family as long as I could remember. She'd begun working at the Diner in high school a few years before Grandpa Collin bought it. When he closed the Diner and opened the Buffet she followed, although she was upset he pulled her from waitressing to put her in the kitchen. She was one of my family's best employees. Martha was a fixture in our family's restaurant like green band Buffalo china and chrome napkin dispensers.

"I don't understand what you mean," I said.

"Please, Grey, I need to finish these onions."

I kept pushing for an answer.

Martha slammed her knife on the prep table, the sound of steel against steel echoed. The other employees stopped for a moment, looked our way, then turned to continue their tasks.

“Grey, you always were a stubborn little shit,” she said.

I smiled. “Yeah, so. You’ve told me that before.”

“Oh I have, have I?”

“Yes, I remember it clearly. Right after the restaurant moved here. When you first started working in the kitchen.”

Along the outside wall of the Buffet’s kitchen, at chest level, was a swinging disposal door that allowed access to the dumpster below it. The opening was large enough to throw #10 cans, smaller boxes, produce scraps, and other items directly into the receptacle outside instead of walking out the back delivery door and around the building. The trash window was a relic left over from the days when the building was once the IGA grocery store.

“I asked you what that swinging door was for,” I said, pointing to it. “You told me it was to toss stubborn little boys into the dumpster, ones that asked too many questions.”

Martha laughed. “I said that?”

“Yes, I remember it well. I didn’t know if you were joking or not. You used to scare the shit out of me. You’ve scarred me for life.”

“Well, I’ve known a few people in my day I’d-a-liked to thrown through that door. Today your grandpa is one of ‘em.”

“What’s going on?”

“He’s pissed. Business has picked up. People are saying the food is better than ever. They’re talking all over town saying your Mom and Dad have brought new life to the place.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he’s mad.”

“Listen, I’ve known your family a long time, everything about them, more than you know I bet. If I didn’t like y’all I would’ve never stayed, especially after Collin took me from waitressing, which was grossly unfair, and stuck me back here. But he’s causing trouble with the others.”

“What others?”

“The other employees. He was sitting out there this morning saying awful things about your mother. Saying Dessa was a gold-digger; that she married C.J. for the restaurant money; that we might as well get use to never seeing anymore Christmas bonuses or vacation pay. That Dessa, if she hadn’t already, would spend all the money.”

“What? You’re not serious?”

“Yes I am. He’s got them all riled up.”

“Did you say anything?”

“Grey, it’s not my place. I don’t want to get involved in your family’s drama. I need my job.”

“Martha, first of all nothing is going to happen to your job. Secondly, everyone is getting their annual Christmas bonus as well as vacation pay. That kind of stuff’s not changing.”

“He was saying some awful hateful things about Dessa.”

“Look, Dad and I’ll talk to everyone. In the meantime you can tell them that Grandpa Collin is just trying to stir shit. You’re right; he’s pissed about talk around town. I’ll call Dad and we’ll get it worked out.”

I stood and returned my chair to its corner.

“Take a break, will ya. Your face looks like hell.”

“Well, thanks a lot. You don’t look to damn good yourself.”

I leaned in and gave Martha a kiss on the cheek. “Maybe we can get you on the serving floor for a few shifts,” I said.

“Stop that!” she said, swatting at me. “I don’t need any more shit from anyone today. I’m set in my ways now. Too old.”

Returning to the restaurant office, the door closed, I called Dad to tell him of the morning’s events.

“Martha says the employees are upset. They really aren’t saying much to me,” I told him.

“I’ll be right over,” he said.

Even though I’d been general manager for almost two years I hadn’t totally earned the trust of our employees. I was still the boss’s son; some thought I was a mole. Mom was at home raising my little brother Cameron. Dad was the one they trusted because they’d worked under him for so many years. When Dad arrived he went directly to the kitchen to speak with the staff.

Just before noon Grandpa Collin returned to have lunch with the remaining CC boys. I went to the kitchen and cornered Dad.

“Grandpa Collin is back,” I said.

My Dad's face turned red, the vein on the right side of his neck began to throb. With a determined step he left the kitchen and headed directly toward Grandpa Collin in the dining room.

From my position standing behind the buffet, near the kitchen door, I watched as Dad stopped Grandpa Collin in the middle of the dining room before he reached the CC boys. Their voices quickly rose. The dining room's Saturday hum fell silent. The sound of glasses clinking and utensils scraping plates ceased. Waitresses stopped in their tracks, customers sat motionless in their seats.

"Why are you saying that shit to my employees? Spreading lies," I heard Dad shout, his finger waving in Grandpa Collin's face then pointing toward the kitchen, "Why are you talking about my wife, about my family that way?"

Something changed. Grandpa Collin looked like an old despot desperate for former glory. A disheveled man somewhat like, I imagined, the vagrants he once fed at the Diner's back kitchen door. Dad's face and neck were as red as butchered meat. Everyone was watching. Had the power between them shifted?

Grandpa Collin turned and walked toward the front door. Dad followed. Outside they stood near the front windows. Dad's jugular looked as if it might rupture. Grandpa Collin, his right fist clinched, tried to take a swing but Dad stopped his fist in motion. The power had indeed shifted. Grandpa Collin got into his car and left, his tires sent a cloud of loose sand and dirt flying behind them. Grandpa Collin told Dad he'd never step foot in the restaurant again. He never did. Two weeks later the restaurant celebrated its 40th Anniversary without him. December arrived and the employees got their Christmas bonuses, vacation pay, plus a glazed ham for each of their holiday dinner tables.

Two years after the argument Grandpa Collin was rushed to Mercy Memorial Hospital with abdominal pain. Tests revealed an abdominal aneurism. Mom suggested he'd developed it from harboring so much anger and hatred. He underwent surgery immediately to correct to problem yet never fully recovered. For a week after the surgery Dad spent every night at his bedside but Grandpa Collin would not speak to him. He refused to acknowledge Dad sitting there. When Aunt Charlene would come -- she and Dad sat in shifts -- Grandpa Collin would speak with her but never to Dad. The night Grandpa Collin died Dad was sitting by his side.

For over sixty years Grandpa Collin smoked. Although his abdominal aneurism was corrected his lungs were unable to survive the surgery. Grandma Dixie's sister Kay Ann was convinced his paper-thin lungs had been burnt up by too much oxygen having been administered during the operation. Doc Vonderbreak II, once the new, young, fresh faced resident physician at Mercy Memorial the night grandma Dixie was rushed to the emergency room after having been beaten and knocked out of her kitchen chair, the same doctor that delivered her still-born son William Lee, the doctor Grandpa Collin verbally assaulted in the hospital's hall that horrific night demanding Grandma Dixie be allowed to hold her dead son, this doctor was the same, highly respected, experienced, credible surgeon that so many years later held Grandpa Collin's life in the balance.

"Doc Vonderbreck is a professional," Mom told Aunt Kay Ann, "he would *never* make the mistake of giving too much oxygen to one of his patients."

Daniels' Family Buffet remained on Fairground Avenue until my family built the 'new' 430 seat Daniels' Family Buffet on the old Bonhomme Apple Orchard ground located on Highway 41.

Rosabelle Bonhomme was the sole surviving matriarch of the orchard, her family's business leftover from the 1950's, its land worth more than its fruit. She reigned over her dead father's shrinking empire for over 40 years; she knew everyone in Ft. Sackville. I'd known her all my life.

Chapter Five

- Robbie Palmer -

The plan was to drive my U-Haul as far as Nashville and stay the night at Kirk's. During my former restaurant life Kirk Michaels and I were lovers for five years. I'd met him the year before we'd opened the new Daniels' Family Buffet on Highway 41. I had tried to keep our relationship under-the-radar, fearful of repercussions leveled against my family or the restaurant by the community. It had been done to others. They did it to my high school classmate Robbie Palmer and his family.

Robbie was in my accounting class at Harrison High. I was a junior; he was a senior, skinny, and always seemed to be smiling. We weren't friends but we were friendly. Heather sat behind him in the row next to mine. She was blond with 80's MTV hair, shoulder pads under her bold print sweaters, curious and always asking questions. She and Robbie talked often. A few weeks before his murder he'd shown her the necklace he was wearing. He'd turned in his chair to face her and I overheard their conversation.

"Where's he from?" Heather asked.

"Indianapolis. Just finished his freshman year at Ft. Sackville Community College," Robbie said. "He's going to stay for my graduation, maybe for the summer. If he can find a job."

"What's his major?"

"Law Enforcement."

"What do you guys do?"

“Mostly just hang out at his apartment. There’s a party the weekend after his finals. He’s taking me to that.”

“Have you guys kissed?”

“Yes.”

“What was it like?”

“Jesus, Heather, enough with the inquisition,” I said. Robbie smiled then turned forward in his chair to face our teacher.

Robbie lived with his mother and two sisters on the north end of town near the Wabash River. It was a poor neighborhood of square prewar houses –three, no more than four rooms. When Dad was in high school he said some still had dirt floors. Robbie was in elementary school when his father abandoned the family. Robbie, his mother Ruth, and sisters were regular customers at Daniels’.

Ruth was a craft-lady. During the months of October and November our restaurant served pumpkin pie baked in disposable aluminum pans; our cooks saved the used tins for her. Once a week she would knock at the restaurant’s kitchen door to collect the silver discs in a trash bag. She cut the used pie tins into shapes of moons, stars, snowflakes, toy soldiers, or other various holiday icons. Manipulating the metal, applying texture then color, she created unique and popular Christmas ornaments to give as gifts or to be donated and sold at church holiday fundraisers. She enjoyed being active at her church Wabash Valley Baptist.

Robbie told Heather in our accounting class that he’d met this guy at Ft. Sackville Community College and they were dating. Everyone in school assumed Robbie was gay but he was not ‘out.’ At least not to the entire student body. He trusted Heather and she

was intrigued by him. A handful of hair stylist -hair dressers, Heather called them- were the only gay people in Ft. Sackville she knew. I concealed my orientation by trying to fit in with the school's jocks, the popular kids. I dated girls. When dating didn't work, I took close female friends to proms or cotillions. I watched the boys, the athletes like my best friend Daryl Stone -he was in Robbie's senior class- walk down the halls of Harrison. I wondered what it must be like for them, for him. I'd begun to fantasize about having sex with a guy. I was intrigued by their bodies. However, I spent my time trying to disguise my feelings fearful of being found out while also trying to keep control of my raging hormones. Robbie seemed to be figuring out who he was. No apologies. He did not force his orientation on his classmates. They in turn kept him in his place, maintained power over him with their homophobic comments. For the most part he remained silent. Yet it seemed he felt safe with Heather. I understand now he was struggling with the same issues as I. But I kept him as an acquaintance -that guy in accounting class- fearing gay by association.

Two weekends before Robbie's graduation from Harrison he went to the party with his boyfriend hosted in a house near the Ft. Sackville Community College. It was the last night anyone saw him alive. Following Robbie's disappearance his boyfriend was questioned then released. Others at the party were also questioned. Nothing substantial found. The partygoers' silence seemed pervasive. They feared being 'outed' by authorities or the newspaper. As the week passed talk among Harrison's student body, in accounting class, became wild. Gossip flew. When Robbie's decomposing, disfigured body was found a week later, ravaged by rodents and wild animals, the community was shockingly apathetic considering there'd been a murder.

During Harrison High School's Class of 1986 graduation ceremony, among the chairs symmetrically positioned on the floor of Clark gymnasium filled with his classmates prepared to receive their diplomas, Daryl included, Robbie's green gown was carefully draped over his empty chair with cap and tassel placed in his seat and a single red rose on top. He had been buried earlier the same day.

After the ceremony Ft. Sackville swallowed whole the rumors concerning Robbie's murder. The community's appetite was insatiable and the local newspaper had a field day. In one report the paper printed the off-campus party was "homosexual in nature." In another, a journalist conducted an interview with Ruth in which he revealed a private conversation where Robbie confided in his mother that he might be gay. Local pastors dusted off their "Evils of Homosexuality" sermons. According to their logic, Robbie died because he chose the wrong path. Clergy and congregation alike acted as if God himself had murdered Robbie –the consequence of sin. "According to *Romans*, God's message is clear," said Pastor Damian of the Wabash Valley Baptist Church. "Beware; men turning from the natural uses of women will result in death." He was Ruth's Pastor; Wabash Valley Baptist was her church. Pastor Damien's sermon was the Sunday following Robbie's funeral and graduation. Ruth sat in the middle pew unable to leave without being noticed. She never attended another service. Several of our restaurant's customers repeated, embellished, and propagated the story. Ruth and Robbie's sisters stopped eating in my family's restaurant in an effort to avoid the community as much as possible. Later that same year in October and November our cooks saved the used pie pans as usual but Ruth never knocked on the kitchen door to collect them.

After Robbie's murder I learned Ft. Sackville's game and how to play by its rules. The unspoken commandments were that one can be gay but must not *act* gay; there is no talking about it; acknowledgment is akin to acceptance; if ever brought up in conversation, the word *gay* must be whispered as one does when saying *cancer* or *alcoholic*. Two men, long-term lovers who for years owned a local hair salon according to the community were "just friends."

Six years after Robbie's murder when at age twenty-three I finally came out to Heather we spoke about Robbie.

"You know, the thing that bothers me most is everyone acted like his murder was no big deal. As if he deserved it. Just a gay guy," she said. "In accounting class he always had his homework. He worked hard in school. He probably would've gone on to be really successful. Do you remember the accounting workbook?"

"No," I said.

"Yes you do. The workbook pages? We had to rip them from the back, complete, and then submit at the end of class. Robbie always finished ahead of time. He'd pass them to me; I'd copy his work. I hated that class."

"I don't remember that at all."

"He was smart."

"I just remember the both of you talked a lot."

"I felt sorry for him. Everybody teased him. Called him a fag when he passed in the hall."

“Maybe that’s why he started hanging out with guys from Ft. Sackville Community College,” I said. “You know, I remember hearing the guy he was dating moved back to Indy after the grand jury investigation. Said he kept getting harassed. Wonder if he finally became a cop?”

“What are *you* going to do when you meet someone?”

“That’s a no-brainer. I’ll have to keep it quiet. The restaurant customers would freak.”

“You need to be careful. I don’t know what I’d do if something ever happened to you.”

I had no idea a year after my conversation with Heather a guy named Kirk Michaels would walk into my life, love me, and make me the happiest I’d ever been. And then, five years later, he’d walk out of it leaving me curled and crying in a fetal position on the kitchen floor of our house on Kelso Creek Road.

For the most part keeping my relationship with Kirk a secret worked –at least it appeared so. Only close friends, my parents and brother knew. But my relationship with him ended on a stunning Sunday afternoon in June, the two of us rocking in a porch swing under a Dogwood tree. Kirk was leaving. He’d met someone else –Jackson.

In that moment of Kirk’s confession I didn’t argue with him. I didn’t fight. I remained silent. I rose from the swing, walked across our manicured lawn, and into the house. I grabbed a bottle of Bud Light from the refrigerator, went into the family room,

sat on the sofa and stared at the Pecky Cypress paneling and large St. Meinrad stone fireplace. I could never tell Kirk I loved him. It's what we fought about most. But I did love him. He wanted us to be a part of the community but I couldn't. The risk, I thought, was too great. My family's lives, our financial well being depended on the restaurant. With Kirk I'd had become comfortable in my own skin. He was like me. I could share with him what I'd hidden from everyone else. I knew my faults; I'd asked him to never give up on me. Yet, I couldn't do what he asked, what he wanted.

Sitting there I thought of nothing else as Kirk packed his things and began loading his car. Sinking in self-pity, I felt as if I were being tossed back into a world that didn't want me.

I finished the first beer then grabbed another. I stayed cocooned within the kitchen and family room of our mid-century ranch listening to the fall of his footsteps on the hardwood floors at the other end of the house as he carried *his* pieces of our relationship down the hall and out the front door. I didn't watch him leave. Neither of us said goodbye. I heard his car engine start then fade into the length of the asphalt driveway. After sitting for what seemed like hours, the daylight having grown faint, I called Rosabelle. For the last several years she had been a close friend and confidante to me.

Rosabelle was theater living in a thee-ATER town.

Her voice was vodka. Cigarettes. Whispered in your ear. High kicks at dinner. Reason at lunch. Her sentences sifted, drawing her words out between breaths. To me she was Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, with a dash of Mae West's "Come up 'n see me sometime."

Rosabelle was my touchstone. The voice of Ft. Sackville reason. She knew the community, what people were capable of. She understood their humanity. Their brutality. I learned all of that from her. She tried to save me from myself. She was the first person I told I was gay.

In her younger days she had male lovers. Relationships with alcoholic, abusers; one was certifiable. She now lived with Mae MacIntosh, formerly of Louisville, Kentucky. They operated the orchard's only remaining profitable business, *Rosabelle's*, a gift shop and general store housed in the orchard's former roadside market. They met in Chicago at a quarterly trade show for retailers on a buying trip the year I graduated high school. For almost 25 years they've lived together.

When Mae first arrived in Ft. Sackville it did not go unobserved that her last name was MacIntosh and she lived with the owner of an apple orchard or that Rosabelle had brought her to town.

Over the phone I confessed to Rosabelle that Kirk was gone. He'd met someone else. Usually one for advice or insight she remained extraordinarily quiet, nothing but a heavy sigh. She did offer a warning: the Weather Channel was reporting a severe thunderstorm with torrential rain moving over the county later that night.

"Be sure your backup sump-pumps are ready," she said, knowing a single pump could not keep my basement dry during a summer deluge.

"I'll stop by the store later in the week," I said. We hung up.

That night my house lost power. The basement flooded.

The next morning I walked through the backdoor of my family's restaurant and knew a polar shift had altered my planet, forever. Nothing looked or smelled the same. I had loved the restaurant but now I didn't. I didn't love anything. I hated Ft. Sackville. Outside of me it was a normal Monday, a typical workday. And just as I'd done since coming out to my parents six years prior, I suppressed my feelings and emotions -what was really happening in my life- and packed them into the pit of my stomach and weighted them with anger. Kirk no longer existed outside our house on Kelso Creek Road and somehow I had to erase him from my heart.

Three days after Kirk left I joined Tri-State Athletic Club in Evansville, hired a personal trainer, quit going to *Teana Feyes*, the gay bar in Evansville, Indiana, and decided to work on me. Gay was gone. Temporarily at least, until I figured out my next move. Kevin, a local hair stylist turned friend, cut my Backstreet Boy-inspired, blonde bowl-cut hair, which I'd worked hard to maintain -having spent a fortune on product. I began strength training with short, spikey brown hair -just the tips highlighted. (Not all the gay had to go!) I toned up and lost 15 lbs., after hours spent sweating on the Elliptical, my portable CD player and earbuds pouring Cher's *Life after Love* and Deborah Cox's *Nobody's Supposed to be Here* into my brain -their fuel igniting into flaming anthems. Eventually I decided I, too, could be a diva. If Cher and Deborah could overcome heartbreak so could I. By Autumn I had. Or at least I thought so.

One Saturday night, months after my breakup, I decided to return to *Teana Feyes*. It was just me, my new body and my shorter hair. I hadn't seen or spoken to Kirk since that Sunday in June, what few friendships I did have in Evansville -most of whom had been Kirk's before mine- I'd put on hold. I told no one I was going. When I arrived I parked my Corvette down the street behind a neighboring building. I walked in, sat down at the bar and ordered an Absolute and Club Soda with lime. Two stools from me sat my friend Stephanie with whom, two summers before, I'd spent a month touring England and Ireland. Being her usual animated self, she was engrossed in conversation with her roommate, Craig, sitting on her other side. I'd met him at her house party that same summer of Europe. No one, not even Stephanie noticed me. I sat at the bar listening to their conversation, watching others with whom Kirk and I had been friends as they approached the bar, ordered drinks, then walked away clueless. I said nothing. I sat patiently, drawing no attention to myself, enjoying my drink and my new anonymity. I watched and waited to see if Kirk was there. He wasn't. After two drinks curiosity got the best of me; I reached over to tap Stephanie on the shoulder.

"Aren't you going to speak to me?" I asked.

"Grey! Oh my god! I didn't recognize you. Where have you been? You don't look like you," she said.

"Self-imposed isolation," I replied.

Peeking his head around her, Craig said, "It's great to see you again. We thought maybe the Christians had you chained to the chicken fryer."

"Did you bring some fried potato wedges?" Stephanie asked jokingly, a glint of hopefulness in her eyes. "Druthers got nothing on Daniels' potato wedges."

“She still talks about those damn wedges,” Craig said.

The spring before our Europe trip Stephanie and Craig had driven to Ft. Sackville to eat at Daniels’ Family Buffet. Lunch was supposed to be working out details, arrangements as to where I might meet her -Gatwick or Heathrow- since she would be leaving a month before me to backpack across the Continent. However, it ended up being about potato wedges. Stephanie was a foodie. She was obsessed. And since Daniels’ was a buffet she thought she’d found Nirvana.

“So, I’m sure you heard about Kirk and me.”

“Yeah. We could see that coming,” she said glancing sidelong toward Craig.

“Really? I didn’t,” I said.

“Are you crazy? You guys fought and broke up all the time.”

“Well, yes. But we always got back together. We’ve never been apart this long. Not spoken.”

“I think he’s moved on. He and Jackson live together in an apartment off Green River Road,” she said. “They’re getting ready to move to Nashville. Jackson got a job there.”

“Really. They’re living together? You know him?”

“Yeah. In fact, he’s standing right there at that high-top with those lesbians.”

Across the bar toward the dance floor was a young blonde college graduate looking more like a college freshman. My thirtieth birthday was only three months away. I was not handling well the idea of turning thirty and Jackson, a newbie as far as I was concerned, added to my aggravation.

“You’re kidding me? That’s him? Is he even twenty-one?” I asked.

“Apparently,” she said. Turning back to look again I saw him approaching. It was clear I was about to meet him.

“Hey Stephanie. Hey Craig,” he said.

He even sounds like a newbie.

I fixed my gaze upon him. The party scene in *All About Eve* began in my mind. Kirk and I spent many nights smoking pot and drinking martini’s watching the movie. Now *my* Eve was standing in front of me.

“Jackson, I’d like you to meet my dear friend, Grey.” Stephanie said.

Jackson smiled and held out his hand.

“Grey. Daniels.” she said, pausing between my first and last name, her eyes expectant. The same look she gave a plate of potato wedges.

“You’re Kirk’s ex? Oh. Um. Well. It’s nice to meet you.”

I kept one hand in my lap, the other wrapped around my cocktail. I wanted so much to be Bette Davis at that moment and toss my drink in his face. Or tramp glamorously down three front-porch steps of a Malayan rubber plantation like Bette did in *The Letter*, firing bullets into the son-of-a bitch’s chest with each step as he lay bleeding at my feet.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

But I resisted reaction. I sat there. Frozen expression. Eyes lasered. He withdrew his hand, turned, and walked back to the high-top.

“That was the fucking best!” Stephanie snorted. “I can’t wait until Kirk shows up.”

“He’s coming tonight?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. Craig talked to him at Walmart today. Said he was working days now. Has tomorrow off.”

Craig grinned. “I think we need shots,” he said.

I agreed, knocked back the rest of my cocktail, channeled my best Margot Channing and said, “Fasten your seatbelts, it’s gonna be a bumpy night.”

Stephanie and Craig were giddy with anticipation.

As the bartender placed the Hot Damn shots in front of us I saw, reflected in the mirror behind the liquor bottles, Kirk enter the bar then walk directly toward Jackson.

I glared at my reflection watching their embrace, their kiss. I slammed my shot.

The scene had begun.

This time I would fight.

And I did. We did. The ensuing weekends at *Teana Faye’s* witnessed arguments between Kirk and me and punches thrown at one another. But by December everything had become too much.

It was a late December night after work and I was sitting in my brand-new Ford Expedition with the garage door closed, the windows of the SUV down, and the engine running. I don’t know how long I sat there. Death, I thought, would be relief from my false life, reparation for not getting my education, the sentence for being stuck in the family business, for not having the spirit to be honest, for feeling trapped.

I closed my eyes.

In that moment, Ashley -my four-year-old Doberman I'd kept after the break-up- began scratching, clawing at the side door of the garage. Her whimpers becoming howls pierced something inside me.

I remembered what Rosabelle had said.

I shut the motor off. Opened the door. Walked out of the garage, then sat on the sidewalk outside. Ashley sprang upon me, nudged my cheeks with her nose and sniffed about assessing my condition.

Rosabelle once told me the story about a time in her life when she felt overwhelmed, during her last relationship with a guy named Eugene: "that crazy son-of-a-bitch-Buick-salesman," she called him.

"Everything had become too much."

She took pills.

I don't know the details of that night, but she was rushed to Mercy Memorial's Emergency Room, which resulted in a few days recovery with evaluation in the fifth floor psychiatric ward. She was released. No follow-up care needed. It was a moment. An emotional hiccup. However, people kept saying: "You know, she spent time on the fifth floor."

"I wanted to bury my head in the sand," she said. "I hid at home for almost a week. I unplugged the phone, locked myself away."

"Did you know people were talking about you?" I asked.

"Yes. Of course. They talk about others. Why not me?"

“Weren’t you pissed?”

“Hell yes! But then my friend Frank showed up Friday night, started knocking on my door. Relentless. He wouldn’t give up. I had to let him in. He told me to shower, find my best dress, my boldest jewelry, to make myself up like no tomorrow. “We’re going out for dinner then bar-hopping!” he said.

“Did you go?” I asked.

“He talked me into it after a couple of cocktails. Driving to the Executive Inn he told me I was going to walk in smiling with my head held high. I was to stroll through the dining room waving hello while stopping at every table along my way. I had to make sure everyone saw me. Make sure they knew I was there.”

Rosabelle said Frank wanted her to take ownership. Confront the community, the rumors; destroy their power. Nothing could be proven. “Do it,” he said, “with sincerity. Don’t ask them how they’re doing. Tell them what a wonderful evening *you’re* having. Show no weakness.” Rosabelle had been masticated by Ft. Sackville. That night she made them choke on it.

“You need to do the same,” she said to me.

But how was I supposed to face Ft. Sackville without Kirk? I wasn’t as strong as Rosabelle. I couldn’t manage my family’s restaurant knowing customers and employees knew I was gay, imagining their hateful slurs and vitriolic words. I’d heard what they said after Robbie Palmer was murdered. What would stop them from saying the same things to me? About me? It was time for me to go, time for me to leave the restaurant and my hometown, time to be with people like me. I had watched *The Real World -Miami Beach* on MTV. Friends from Evansville had been to South Beach. I’d fallen in love with

Florida the moment I stepped foot on Captiva Island during a long weekend vacation with my best friend Daryl and his father. South Florida was the answer. And supposedly South Beach was the gayest place ever. Miami Beach was where I needed to start over.

Five months after that dark December night I quit my job at the restaurant, moved to Miami Beach, enrolled in my first summer semester of college, graduated two years later, and began teaching at Everglades High School. I'd found my independence, a diverse and accepting community, and most importantly, anonymity. Nobody gave a shit about me, who my family was, or that I was gay. I could finally breathe.

Until Mom's phone call.

Now I was in a U-Haul heading north to Ft. Sackville. Kirk and I had mended our friendship and moved beyond our past, so he offered to let me stay the night at his house in Nashville, the one he shared with Jackson. Fortunately Jackson was out of town on business.

Chapter Six

- Meeting Kirk Michaels -

I was looking forward to seeing Kirk. A part of me would always love him. I was embarrassed that he was about to witness my life turned upside down, parked in his driveway. After our breakup he himself had moved on. That's how he'd landed in Nashville. He had Jackson, a good job, and a beautiful townhome –immaculately furnished I'd been told- and he was happy. It would be a nice reunion.

When I arrived that first night, after I backed my U-Haul into the driveway practically against his garage door, Kirk gave me a tour of his home. It was remarkable. Tastefully decorated. Craftsman mixed among Mid-Century with a few well-placed antiques –a mahogany glass display cabinet sat near the dining room loaded with martini glasses collected during travels with Jackson. There was one guest bedroom; the other had been turned into a home office. When I stepped into the room it was as if I'd walked into the pages of *Nashville Living*. I couldn't help but think I'd fucked up my life. “I think I'll just sleep on the sofa,” I said. Kirk looked at me somewhat bewildered. “Why don't you want to sleep in here?” he asked. “This bed is far more comfortable.”

“I don't know. It just feels kind of weird. I think it's better if I sleep downstairs,” I said.

“Suit yourself. I put clean towels and washcloths in the guest bath, you can at least use it.”

Yeah, I'm going to. It's been a long day. I just kind of want to shower and go to sleep.”

“I understand. Just make yourself at home, Grey. Seriously. This is no big deal. Jackson knows you’re here. We’ve all moved past the bullshit.”

“I know. It’s just a little awkward. More so that I thought it would be.”

“Well, I’ll leave you alone. Holler at me if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Kirk. I really do appreciate this.”

“No problem.”

After my shower I saw Kirk had set up the sofa up with sheets, blankets, and a pillow. I’d heard him rattling around the house but by the time I got out of the bathroom he was in his bedroom, the one he shared with Jackson. Once downstairs I dropped my overnight bag at the foot of the sofa and crawled under the blankets. The sofa was comfortable and I figured I’d be out in no time. I wasn’t. All I could think about was how I was in Kirk’s house in Nashville, Tennessee and how he was happy. Whereas my life was packed in a U-Haul in *his* driveway and I was headed back to Ft. Sackville. I had indeed fucked up my life. I thought about the first night I met Kirk.

It was during a road-trip with a drag queen and a lesbian that I first heard the name Kirk Michaels. A week later at *Teana Faye’s* I met him.

Teana Faye’s, a ‘new’ gay bar that opened after Sho-Bar mysteriously burnt to the ground, was located in downtown Evansville on the banks of the Ohio River in the former *Kingfish Restaurant*, a building originally designed to resemble a dual paddlewheel riverboat –the kind found cruising the Mississippi in Mark Twain novels.

Near its starboard paddlewheel patrons walked its gangway entering its hostess area which served as the bar's ID checkpoint. There a cover charge was collected for advertised events: special-guest drag performances, Christmas shows, and AIDS benefits. Its stern was the bar, its bow, formerly the restaurant's dining room, was the dance lounge. From the steamboat's empty pilothouse above the black and white checkered dance floor hung a mirrored disco ball and spotlights with vibrant colors that illuminated the drag stage and its glittering sliver-lamé curtain. That night, sitting in a booth aside the dance floor, I spotted Kirk as he entered the hostess area looking left, then right, trying, it seemed, to decide which part he would enter first. He looked just as he'd been described, tall, thin, and nerdy cute with glasses and black hair.

He chose the bar side. And in the next moment I was at the bar beside him ordering my cocktail. I introduced myself hoping to strike up polite conversation while we both waited for our drinks. He said hello. He was even cuter up close. Next thing I knew he was sitting across from me in my booth aside the dance floor. Conversation with Kirk was effortless.

"Doug was my first friend here," I said.

"Did you know he was a drag queen?" Kirk asked.

"Yes. He was in drag when I met him. Or met *her*, I should say. Apparently his father's boat was the inspiration for her name: Tekela Bree," I said.

"How about Melissa, how'd you meet her?"

"A couple of weeks after Doug. We struck up conversation when she found out I was from Ft. Sackville. She'd just enrolled in Ft. Sackville Community College's Law Enforcement program. She wanted to know about the commute from Evansville to

campus. I told her it sucked. Especially when the time changed. She asked if I thought she should move there. I said no. The commute would suck less.”

“That’s right, you guys are an hour ahead of us.” Kirk said.

“Yes, its ridiculous. Ft. Sackville is directly north of Evansville yet we don’t change our clocks like you guys. It doesn’t make sense. Anyway, how about you. How do you know Doug?” I asked.

“Just from the shows here. And the old Sho-Bar.”

“That was the first gay bar I ever stepped foot in.”

“Kind of nasty, huh?”

“I like this one better, that it’s not in some trashy part of town.” I noticed his cocktail was empty. “You want another drink?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll get this round,” Kirk said.

Kirk slipped from the booth and walked across the dance floor to the bar. In Kirk’s wake Tekela appeared, seemingly from out of nowhere, beside the table wearing her signature white leather jumpsuit with matching thigh-high stiletto boots.

“Girl! It didn’t take you long to swoop in on him,” she said.

I laughed.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You just heard that boy’s name last weekend. Is Melissa here? She needs to see this,” Tekela said.

“Don’t you have a show to do?”

“Those queens backstage are working my last nerve. I had to come out and get some air and a fresh cocktail or else one of those bitches was going to get cut.”

Kirk returned with our drinks.

“Well, if it isn’t Miss Tekela Bree,” Kirk said, hugging Tekela while giving her air kisses on each cheek.

“Your momma brought you up right, never kiss a queen with her face on,” Tekela said.

“You know she did,” Kirk said. He slipped in next to me on my side of the booth. “Sit down. Let me buy you a drink.”

“No. Thank you, darling. This leather don’t stretch that well; I need to stand. Besides, I got my drink coming. I’ve got to get back there and get ready for my number, whip up my wig. It’s like my grand-momma used to say, ‘The higher the hair, the closer to Jesus.’”

“Oh, so we’re going to church tonight?” Kirk asked.

“Darling, there’ll be some testifying and testimony before the night is over, okaay. Got my sights set on that little piece of chicken sitting right over there.” Tekela pointed to a barely legal frat boy from the University of Evansville. “Says his name is Klein. As if. I asked him if he wore Calvin Klein underwear. He said yes. I told him before tonight was over I would de-Klein him.”

“Where do you come up with this shit?” I asked. Looking at Kirk I continued, “I went with Doug ...”

“*Tekela!*” Doug interjected.

“I went with *Tekela* to a drag pageant in Paducah last weekend. He wraps those young guys around his finger. They were falling all over him,” I said. “*She* calls them *chicken*.”

“Finger-licking good! Besides what about you?” Tekela said, pointing to me then looking at Kirk, “This bitch got us thrown out of our motel room for skinny-dipping with the sheriff’s son.”

“The sheriff’s son, huh?” Kirk asked, looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t know he was the sheriff’s son until he told the manager. It’s probably the only reason we didn’t get the police called on us.”

“So you got some chicken, too?” Kirk asked.

“No. *I* was the chicken,” I said.

“Please, Mary, that boy looked like he was in high school.”

“He was 21.”

“Barely,” she said.

“Look, my family makes a fortune selling chicken. I know all about it,” I said.

“What does your family do?” Kirk asked.

“They own a restaurant. So technically it’s fried chicken.”

“Oh lord! Here comes the getting-to-know-you portion of our show,” Tekela said.

“I got to get ready. You girls enjoy yourselves.” Tekela sashayed away from our table toward the bar, snatched her drink, then with a wink disappeared behind the silver stage curtain.

“She’s a riot,” Kirk said.

“He’s not even drunk yet,” I said.

“You mean *she’s* not even drunk yet. So, tell me about Paducah. Sounds like you two had quite a time,” Kirk said.

“Actually there were three of us. Melissa went. She’s the one who said you and I should meet.”

“Oh, okay. Now it makes sense. You were waiting for me tonight, weren’t you.”

“Maybe. Melissa told me to look for this really cute, thin, dark-haired guy with glasses. She said you usually hung out here on the nights you weren’t working.”

“That’s why she stopped me at work yesterday and asked if I was going out tonight. I’ve been set up,” he said, pretending to be annoyed.

“Yeah, sort of. She said she’d be here. That she’d make sure I got the right guy.”

“Oh! So, you don’t even know if you have the right guy?”

“I’m teasing. Yes, I know. It’s you. I’ve seen you before, from a distance.”

“Well, who’s to say I didn’t see you first?” he said.

“So maybe I’m the one that was set up?”

“I’ll never tell,” Kirk said. “Anyway, you were telling me about Paducah, and the sheriff’s son?”

“Not much to tell. The reason we all went is because Doug had entered some drag pageant at that bar DV8. I drove us over. The funny thing is we went in my parents’ Ford Explorer; it has a nameplate on the front that says *Daniels’ Family Buffet*. You kind of have to know Ft. Sackville to appreciate the fact that there we were, the three of us, speeding down the Western Kentucky Parkway into the dark August night loaded with duct tape, wigs, stilettos, beaded gowns, and feathered headdresses all piled in the back of my family’s restaurant’s SUV. Did you know that Cock feathers are Tekela’s favorite? She has this huge headdress made entirely of Cock feathers. It’s all she talks about. The back of the SUV looked like we’d trapped a gay rooster.”

“I think I’ve seen her wear it before.”

“Well, Melissa started talking about you while Doug was getting ready in the front seat.”

“Wait. He dressed in the SUV?”

“Oh yeah. He had his tackle box with him, which he balanced on his lap. As he opened it, it stair-stepped into one of those four-tiered kind. “This is where *she* sleeps,” he said. I was mesmerized by its contents. Instead of fishing lures and hooks, each rack was its own cosmetic counter. “This is my Tekela to-go box,” he said. Before then I’d only seen *her* stacked on a table in the dressing room here. Melissa and I watched as he began his transformation using the visor mirror. Two hours later Tekela emerged.”

“Your parents must be proud.”

“Oh yeah. Like they know. Anyway, Doug ended up losing the drag pageant. Said one of the fat queens competing had blown one of the judges before we got there. Then I got us kicked out of the motel. On the way home we made plans to meet up here tonight. That’s pretty much it.”

“But you still aren’t for sure if I’m the guy.”

“Oh. I’m sure.”

A week after we met, having spent a second night hanging out together at *Teana Faye’s*, and following several long-distance late night phone calls, I invited Kirk to Ft. Sackville. He drove up for our dinner date at The China Palace on Second Street near the college.

The Chinese restaurant had a fairly substantial carryout business but rarely any customers in their dining room. Students from the college were employed as wait staff -- the restaurant was within walking distance of their dorms -- so I knew, considering locals rarely mingled with the mostly out-of-town student body, that no one would recognize me there having dinner with a stranger.

Sitting among the Finger Hut inspired Chinese décor: paper lanterns, gilded dragons, and Bonsai trees painted on the walls, Kirk looked a bit out of place in his paisley, coffee colored long sleeve shirt and dark denim jeans. It wasn't the bold paisley of my grandmother's sofa or drapes but soft, tear-shaped cream-in-coffee whirls. During the meal it did occur to me, after a couple glasses of wine, that his paisley began to look like cartoon versions of spermatozoa spinning wildly about his chest.

I giggled.

Spermatozoa. How did I know that word? From health and safety class in high school? In my mind I saw a sepia toned 8mm movie of Captain Spermatozoa and his band of thin tailed tadpoles racing upstream like salmon, jumping over one another in their frenzied attempt to be first.

If Kirk and I had sex tonight their journey would be fruitless.

“What are you thinking?” Kirk asked. “You have a curious smirk.”

“Oh. Sorry. I'm just really enjoying this evening,” I said.

“Don't be sorry.” He smiled. “So am I.”

I returned my mind's focus to Kirk. In an attempt to take my thoughts away from tadpoles, I imagined him without his shirt. *What is that saying? Something about carpet matching the drapes?* I felt my face flush with heat.

He was handsome sitting there. Placed. Feet firmly rooted. Owning his spot in the world – my world. I wondered what he was thinking. *Was he looking at me the way I was looking at him? Was he wondering if he would be staying the night? Is he thinking about sex? God, I hope he's not picturing me without my clothes on.*

There was a calm ease about us through dinner; silent recesses between stories, a comfortable quiet. The conversation wasn't forced. It slipped effortlessly between our pauses.

After dinner I drove Kirk around Ft. Sackville. He'd never been there. Like me, his life had been lived in rural Indiana along the Wabash River but further south and west. When he was younger he rode dirt-bikes along gravel roads, among cornfields, and in the river bottoms. He'd gone to college after high school and like me dropped out his sophomore year.

We returned to my house. I offered him a beer. He complimented the shadowed lighting in my living room and the overstuffed sofa on which we were sitting. Its milky cotton fabric complimented his paisley shirt. After visiting Captiva Island in high school, and after becoming the restaurant's general manager, when I bought my house, I set about creating my own beach-inspired bungalow in colors of a tropical sunset. Kirk's tan skin fit in to a T.

“So what do you want to do now,” I asked.

He moved closer to me. We kissed.

“If I don't watch myself I may do something,” he said. “Like kiss you, again.”

“Then don't watch yourself.”

And it was then I lost my awareness of everything with the exception of what

Kirk was wearing, or rather, what he began not wearing, and the smell of his cologne. I could feel the presence of him; he filled the moment. I snatched from my mind the prospect of saving myself from him. *This was nice. This wasn't the backseat of an Oldsmobile or a secret black basement. This was my living room.*

His hand pressed warm against my back as he rested me softly on the sofa. Lying there unclothed my hands caressed his naked torso, our bodies dissimilar, his contours fully molded. I felt inadequate, embarrassed in my physical appearance; Kirk did not seem to agree. There was a channeled energy between us. With his chest mounting in deep breaths, he weighed himself upon me – his skin touching mine. Ours became a physical understanding.

Nearly naked, with the exception of his Ralph Lauren ankle socks, we worked nearer and nearer and became accustomed to each other's rhythm. He felt safe and slippery, full of curious fuel. My world had become white hot, clear, followed by sweet heavy breath.

"I think you are beautiful," he said, his words steaming my ear.

"You do?"

"Yes." Hesitating, he lifted his head from my shoulder. His hazel eyes set sight on my blue ones. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in love?"

"I've never felt it myself." I said. "I don't know."

"I've always believed."

He kissed me then returned his head to my shoulder.

Still awake on Kirk's sofa I heard his soft bare footsteps coming down the stairs from his bedroom. He must have heard me tossing and turning on the sofa.

Walking into his shadowed living room he asked, "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Do you want something to help you sleep?"

"No. I'm OK," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Why aren't *you* asleep," I asked.

"*You're* keeping *me* awake,"

"I am?"

"I'm worried about you," Kirk said.

"This is kind of awkward isn't it?"

"Not really. I invited you to stay. Are you sure you're OK?" he asked.

"My mind is racing. I guess being here, heading back to Ft. Sackville, the restaurant, it's all stirring up the past," I said. "I was thinking about how I treated you, how we treated one another after we broke up."

"That's over and done with. You and I both know we were young, dumb and full of..."

"Yeah. Yeah," I said interrupting him.

Pausing for a moment, I watched as Kirk sat in the chair opposite me wearing only his short blue cotton boxers, his face no longer veiled in shadow. From the window behind me the street's lamplight fell softly upon his skin, washing his trimmed black-haired chest in an amber angelic glow.

"I never told you after we broke up I thought about killing myself," I said.

Something about telling secrets in the dark made it easier.

"What?"

"We'd been fighting. Every time we saw one another it was an attack. I was over the restaurant, over Ft. Sackville. I was over it all." I said.

"You never said anything. Why didn't you tell me?"

"We could barely be in the same room together. How was I supposed to?"

I told Kirk the story of the SUV and the garage. Of Rosabelle's words and Ashley saving my life.

"She was a good dog," he said. "When you gave her away and moved to Miami Beach I tried to get her back."

"You did?"

"Yeah. But they wouldn't give her to me."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too."

"Do people in Ft. Sackville know you tried to kill yourself?" Kirk asked.

"No. No. I never said anything to anyone. You're the only one that knows. It took me a while but I finally figured out why Rosabelle told me her story when I first came out to her: she was telling me to be strong, to be sincere and honest with myself. I just don't

think I can ever do it there.”

“Well, it looks like you’re going to find out real soon,” Kirk said.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Grey, you’ve got to face it sooner or later.”

Chapter Seven

- Rio Iglesias -

There was a noticeable chill in the air the morning I left Kirk's Nashville townhouse. Partly seasonal but mostly because I still loved him.

Driving north from Florida through Georgia into Tennessee, the autumn weather changed before my eyes. Although Kirk welcomed me in his home overnight, was gracious, hospitable, he was distant. And even though his current lover, Jackson, a pharmaceutical sales rep was away on business, his presence was felt. Sleeping on the sofa in the home of my former lover marked the beginning of my journey's end. It reminded me of what I'd lost both in Ft. Sackville and in Miami Beach.

From downtown Nashville I exited onto I-24 and resumed my trek toward Ft. Sackville beneath a gray sky. Ten years had passed since my last Midwestern fall and the winter in which I turned thirty. I could sense seasonal depression and a general despair creeping in.

The night I left Florida, I had thrown a hooded sweatshirt in the cab of the U-Haul, knowing I would need it the next morning. I grabbed it from a box labeled *Florida winter clothes* in the back of the truck. Arriving at Kirk's I wore madras shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. The morning I left, it was blue jeans, and a long sleeved knit shirt, socks and sneakers. I had no winter coat or heavy clothing; they had been given to Goodwill when I moved to Miami Beach. Slipping the sweatshirt over my Henley, I felt its weight. Warmth. Softness. My fingers passed over the raised letters *South Beach* stitched on the front. I recalled the night it was given to me. A gift from Rio. It held his particular scent.

Rio Iglesias was a first-born Cuban-American son. He had short black hair, with a trim athletic build -a credit to his personal trainer at Crunch. Although he was 46 years old he looked much younger. A Duke University summa cum laude graduate, he went on to Yale Law School, again graduating top of his class. Returning to south Florida as a corporate litigation attorney, he began his career at a prestigious Miami law firm where he'd spent summers as an intern. Rio was my friend with benefits. Together we exercised his sexual prowess in his multimillion dollar penthouse located in one of the new condo towers south of Fifth –a completely revitalized, highly sought after neighborhood of Miami Beach and symbolic of success. All 4000 square feet of his white on white skypad was decorated South Beach style. It reminded me of the Delano hotel on Collins Avenue.

My last day in Miami Beach was spent loading the U-Haul. Boxes were stacked everywhere in my two-bedroom art deco apartment on Meridian Avenue. Loading the truck took longer than expected; I kept stopping to watch the 20-something guys across the street play volleyball in Flamingo Park. The more intense their game, the more clothes they took off. Soon the men were down to board shorts, some in tight square-cut swim trunks. I took it all in. Volleyball was never played like that in Indiana.

After the U-Haul was packed I drove it to Rio's, parked it on the street. I met friends for dinner at Balans on Lincoln Road, then at Score for cocktails. One last soiree. When I arrived at Rio's, it was past 2 a.m. He was waiting for me, sipping red Bordeaux from a Baccarat wine glass. A second one waited on the bedroom nightstand. We slept little.

That night Rio kept the balcony's sliding glass wall open, allowing his master bedroom to become one with the tropical night. His taut olive skin tasted like the salty Atlantic sea.

A few hours later, I rose from Rio's bed, walked onto the penthouse balcony to watch the sun swell at the edge of the cobalt sea. First a flicker then a flame, its pink and orange beams penetrated the cumulous clouds. The morning surrendered. Thirty-two stories beneath me yachts moored in the marina thrust rhythmically against the tide tugging at their restraints. White cruise ships slipped through the aqua-green channel of Government Cut from the Atlantic Ocean to the Port of Miami. To the west, the city of Miami's shimmering skyline reflected the sunrise. I turned to look in the bedroom. Beyond the sheer linen curtains Rio seemed to be sleeping, his defined, hairless chest exposed along with his sculpted thighs and legs. A white sheet lay limp across his lower torso, outlining his hips and groin.

"I'm going to miss this," I said.

Rio opened his eyes, his abdomen contracted as he propped himself up with his forearms, "Then stay."

"I can't. Mom needs help with Dad. The restaurant is driving her crazy."

"Admit it, Grey, you're going to miss me," he replied, curling his lip to one side. An irresistible yet well practiced smirk.

"No. I'm going to miss the sunshine. This weather. *Your* view." I shifted my gaze from his face to his body.

Rio threw off the sheet, rose from bed, walked toward me; his commitment to strength training full frontal. Playfully he slapped my ass as we embraced near the balcony's glass railing, his body wrapped in morning sunlight.

“But I’ll be lonely without you.”

“You’re so full of bullshit. No wonder you became a lawyer. You’ve got SoBe muscle queens beating down your door.”

“Well, that is true. I am a catch.”

“*You*, my friend, will *never* be caught.” He knew I was right.

Pulling myself from Rio I looked down to the street below, my U-Haul parked there, waiting. My time in South Beach was over.

Driving north on I-24, Kirk and Nashville no longer in my rear view mirror, I found Rio had usurped Kirk’s position in my mind. *Just this lousy sweatshirt*, I whispered. Yet I was sure, given the chance, I’d gladly give it to Goodwill to have Kirk in my life once again.

Chapter Eight

- November '51 -

As I crossed the White River Bridge driving my U-Haul into the November twilight, the sun sinking into the flat barren farmland, a chill of anxiety began to rise within me. *Am I really here? Back in Indiana?* Ft. Sackville was fifteen miles north on Highway 41. Yet my chest felt it already arrived

My southwestern Indiana hometown first settled by French fur traders became a spoil of war after revolutionaries -- during a surprise attack upon the British -- captured the town's namesake. Landlocked, the pastoral community lay in a flat flood plain bordered to the west by the Wabash River, the town and farms safeguarded against it by a levee, and isolated by highlands from all points other forming a crescent ridge by which one could look down upon the valley of Sycamores, grain silos, and sliver-white church steeples unsheathed and piercing Heaven.

Farming and God were two industries by which family fortune might flourish or fail in Ft. Sackville.

Its townsfolk have, for the most part since the Revolution, succeeded in isolating themselves from wantonness. Even the occasional nonsense that washed down river or traveled Highway 41 from cities larger: whores, queers, Democrats. I grew up in the 'Ville'; most of the population ate in my family's restaurants. Daniels' was a benefactor of *the industry*, relying on its supply: farmers for food, God for customers – most especially the Sunday after-church crowd.

In the cab of my U-Haul the weight of those years before my move to Miami Beach, my restrained life in this pastoral Middle America, began to creep in and constrict my breath. I thought about our restaurant, everything it had survived. How my Dad said it had all begun with a handshake.

In 1951 a man's handshake was his word, a contract, especially between friends and neighbors. My Grandpa Collin shook Lo Campbell's hand and it was a deal. With the handshake came the birth of the Daniels as restaurateurs. I imagined Grandpa Collin eager to get home and announce to Grandma Dixie and their children, Aunt Charlene and Dad, that their lives were about to change. That they'd be staying in Ft. Sackville.

I thought about Grandma Dixie, her reaction. I envisioned the cold, November day –I've experienced them. I know how my Grandpa Collin spoke to her. Growing up, I listened to their conversations in the Diner, often at night after closing. Perhaps she had been packing boxes. For an eternity it might have seemed. Boxes salvaged from her sister and brother-in-law's store, Wollard's Grocery, where Grandpa worked as a butcher since returning from the War. Even though she and Grandpa lived simply, their house on Ridge Road rented, it must have been a task to pack their few possessions: toys, clothes, dishes, photographs, her mother's china and table linens, Grandpa Collin's navy uniform. She must have wondered how so little could take up so much space? Their lives had always been in Ft. Sackville, now they were leaving everything they had known, her parents, sisters, and moving west to find a better job, a better life. *We don't know anyone in San Diego. What was Collin thinking, I'm sure she thought. Thank goodness for the children, at least Charlene and C.J. will be with me.*

My Dad and his eleven-year-old sister must have been a great help to Grandma Dixie the last several weeks while Grandpa Collin worked double shifts for extra money. Although, Dad says he was upset that they'd sold his bicycle. "We'll buy you a new one in California," Grandpa

promised. “They have much faster ones there.” I’m sure Grandma Dixie couldn’t imagine her life without them –the children. She had said the moment Aunt Charlene drew her first breath she’d been an independent spirit, demanding, stubborn. She was all Daniels. C.J., however, needed coddling. He was more tag along. Grandma Dixie’s mother had said C.J., would follow his big sister off a cliff; he had *their* Roberts blood in him, Grandma Dixie’s need to be loved; even though Dad had Grandma Dixie’s spunk he needed someone to watch over him, to love him. I know Grandma Dixie felt blessed to have been given the task.

Dixie was restless, wanting to get the move over, settle, get the children back into a routine, enrolled in school. Christmas break was less than a month and a half away so beginning the new year in San Diego could be the opportunity she and Collin had been looking for. Children need routine. Charlene would have no problem settling in but C.J. might need a little prodding. I’m sure my Grandma could have used a break too. Something new.

“My living room looked like Wollard’s storeroom,” she recounted one evening after closing. *How in the world will we ever move all these boxes*, she had thought.

That November night in ‘51, she’d said Grandpa Collin arrived home just in time for supper. It was the second to the last supper in the Ft. Sackville house. That’s how she thought of it. He bounced through the kitchen door - when happy his step was more bounce than walk - and sat in his usual seat at the kitchen table, his smirk pronounced –a look later made popular by a young rock and roll boy from Memphis on Ed Sullivan. Aunt Charlene and Dad were sitting across from each other waiting for their dad to dig in. Once Grandpa did it signaled they could..

“Collin,” Dixie said, “I can see by the look on your face you got something up your sleeve.”

“How’d you like to stay here near your sisters?” His eyebrows matched his smirk.

“I don’t understand?” she said, passing the mashed potatoes to C.J.

“We’re staying! We’re staying in Ft. Sackville!” Collin announced. The children and Grandma Dixie stared at him.

“Collin, what do you mean? You’re going to get these children wound up; I’ve had a long day. I’m looking forward to getting them fed, bathed, and in bed. I want quiet time, a cup of coffee, and the paper, if I haven’t packed that too.”

“I bought a restaurant!” he said. “I bought The Café from Lo Campbell. You know, his wife Susie’s place on Fairground Avenue. I talked to him this afternoon; I bought it. We shook on it. I’m signing the contract tomorrow. I’m going to pay for it with the weekly receipts.

“You’re out of your tree!” Grandma Dixie replied, in total disbelief. “Did Campbell ask you or did you ask him?”

“I had lunch in there today; he just started talking about how the place was too much for Susie to run. With them owning and running the IGA she didn’t need to work. Plus they were thinking of selling it all and moving to Ocala. There’s a motel down there for sale. Tired of the Indiana winters he said. That’s why we were moving, right? To find a better job? Well, I found one, here!”

Grandma Dixie sat at the table looking past Grandpa toward the barren kitchen walls, the windows with no curtains. *He’d found a job, she thought, after I’d convinced myself we were doing the right thing. My husband bought a restaurant. What in the hell are we going do with a restaurant?*

“Well,” she said, “are you keeping the name?”

“Nope. I already thought of that. It’s going to be Daniels’ Diner! What do you think?”

Our lives will never be the same.

She remembered her older sister Dottie. The steamy, very public affair with married Joe Wollard. She'd been his cashier. Grandma recalled the community uproar. And how Joe had divorced his first wife then married Dottie. How her sister could no longer work the checkout line because customers had refused to buy groceries from 'the other woman'. Owning a family business meant having the community involved in your everyday life. I'm certain Grandma didn't want customers involved in *her* family's affairs.

Restoring her focus on Collin from across the kitchen table she gave the only honest reply she could, "I think you can help me put this house back in order, that's what I think!"

I understood Grandma Dixie. I too, felt responsible for putting things back in order. Now it was about my family. Ten years had passed since I left Ft. Sackville for a new life. Dad was dying. Mom was consumed with his care. The responsibility fell upon me to manage the restaurant, again. I just wasn't sure how I'd keep the community out of *my* family's affairs, out of *my* life, while doing so.

Driving my U-Haul along the southern straightaway of Highway 41 where the road splits the farmland prairie, I began to see Ft. Sackville. Framed by the windshield my hometown's orange sodium-vapor streetlights flickered in the distance. As I grew closer, in the gloaming, outlines of the county's four gothic courthouse towers blended with Christian cathedrals—their shadowed steeples topped with the crucifix cut the twilight. I passed the farm field drainage ditch in which Robbie Palmers murdered body had been dumped and alone in the U-Haul's cab I muttered aloud, "What the fuck am I doing?"

Chapter Nine

- J.C. on the Wall -

To be totally settled in Ft. Sackville I was going to need a house. I had taken a leave of absence from my teaching position but knew deep down I wouldn't be going back. My life was going to be the restaurant.

While staying with my parents the first week I found a small house on Forrest Lane one block over from theirs. It was as if I were starting all over again. Twenty years prior I had bought my first house. It too was on Forrest Lane. I bought it from Anna Benjamin, that's how our friendship began. She was ten years older than I, married, with a pre-school aged son, Blake. I spent many evenings with her and her family. Anna also brokered the four-acre sale of the former Bonhomme Apple Orchard property upon which we built the new Daniels' Family Buffet, the plot of land we bought from Rosabelle. Over the years she'd become a close family friend. She knew intimately the challenges my family had faced since Dad's fist heart attack. I knew she'd get a kick out of the fact that I had found yet another house on Forrest Lane. She answered the phone after several rings.

"I found a house," I said.

"You're really going to do this?" she asked.

"Yes. Got to. Unless you can sell everything."

My parents had once talked, briefly, with Anna about the possibility of selling the restaurant and property if ever it became necessary. Dad's health had been declining for a number of years.

“Well, you know I like to make money. I just want to be certain you’re sure about this,” she said.

“Yes, I’m sure. The house is on Forrest Lane. No comments. Top of the hill. Your competition has it listed. A mid-century ranch. You know I love those mid-century ranches.”

“I can probably get your old house on Kelso Creek Road back if you want. We can make them an offer.”

“I said I loved them. I didn’t say I wanted to deal with a flooding basement or a rising creek. Besides, that house is haunted. Way too many ghosts.”

Anna laughed. “Ok, let me make a call. I am glad you’re moving back,” she said. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” I replied.

Anna scheduled an appointment the next afternoon to see the house. A friend of mine from Indianapolis, Garland Reitz, traveling through Ft. Sackville on the way to his parents’ house in Chandler stopped by Mom and Dad’s just as I was about to leave. My parents were at the restaurant and planned to meet me at the Forrest Lane house, I wanted their input. I invited Garland along too.

Garland was 6’3”, built like a Indianapolis Colts football player without the muscle -- he’d never played football in his life -- thick, raven-black hair, and an infectious sense of humor. Garland was the type of guy that always made an entrance.

He once dressed up as his alter persona, Miss Firecracker, for one of Rosabelle and May's 4th of July parties. Ft. Sackville did not intimidate him in the least. Mom and Dad had met him before. Anna had not.

Garland and I arrived just as Anna did. I introduced the two as we walked toward the house. It was a clear, crisp November day. Sitting on its half-acre of well-manicured lawn, amidst the reds, yellows, golds of the season, the house looked as if it were sitting in Van Gogh's *Autumn Garden*. Bronze colored Chrysanthemums had been planted on each side of the front steps leading to the door. I recalled "The Thanksgiving Visitor" by Truman Capote, a favorite short story I taught my 10th graders at Everglades High. In the story Sook, the aunt, says her "Chrysanthemums are as big a lion's heads." I was reminded of how much I loved autumn in Indiana and how I'd missed it.

Stepping into the foyer, I heard Mom and Dad pull into the drive. They soon appeared alongside Anna, Garland, and me.

"So the house is listed for \$175,900.00. City utilities, total electric, gas fireplace. Three bedrooms, two baths, carport, basement, laundry is located there. Taxes are \$675.00 semi-annually."

"Wow! O'girl has got the stats down," Garland said.

Anna laughed. "That's my job. I'm here to inform."

I began walking toward the spacious living room, its wall of windows beside the Bedford Limestone fireplace framed the fall season. Many Midwestern houses built during the 1950's and '60's used stone quarried in Bedford, Indiana, for both interiors and exteriors.

“Well, riddle me this, Miss Anna Bell Lee, do the people that live here know Jesus?” Garland asked.

“Uh? What? Please, call me Anna.”

“So far, just walking from the foyer to the living room I’ve counted three pictures of Jesus hanging on the wall.”

“Oh, Anna, he’s just messing with you,” I said.

“No, I’m serious. J.C. is watching our every move,” Garland said pointing.

“Look. One. Two. Three.”

I laughed. “Anna, he’s right. Look around. Jesus is everywhere! Who are these people?”

“Thompson. Their last name is Thompson,” Anna responded.

“Well, this house brings a whole new meaning to the song *Personal Jesus*,” Garland said. “I’ve got to check this out.” He sashayed down the hall toward the bedrooms singing the Depeche Mode song

Anna looked bewildered.

“I think I know them. They’re Wabash Valley Baptist people; they have a boy named Trace.” Dad said. “Hell, Dessa, this is Trace Thompson’s parent’s house. I thought I knew this house.” Trace was a senior in high school who bussed tables and worked in the dish-room at the restaurant.

“It makes sense. I knew his family was involved in the church. Trace is in the choir,” Mom said.

As I began to look around, through the dining room and in the kitchen Garland was right, Jesus was everywhere. There were stove burner covers, a toaster cozy, magnets

on the refrigerator, all with pictures of Jesus, some with scripture. The bookshelves were loaded with Christian theology, Christian fiction, Bibles in all sizes.

“They must collect Bibles like Mom used to collect travel spoons,” I said.

“Nine...” called Garland from one of the bedrooms.

“What is he doing?” Anna asked.

“I think he’s counting pictures of Jesus.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“Nope.”

“Sixteen...” Garland said.

My parents were laughing but Anna had no idea what to make of Garland. “What does he do for a living?” she asked.

“He sells women’s cosmetics for Macys.”

“Thirty-two,” yelled Garland.

“Really?” replied Beth.

Walking down the hall to look at the bedrooms, I noticed the bathroom door was shut. Garland was taking a break from his Jesus tally. The bedrooms were unremarkable, basic, except for the overabundance of religious icons on every wall, every shelf. It was a bit unnerving but I liked the place. I liked its style, the floor-plan. I returned to the living room. Mom and Dad were sitting on the sofa; Mom’s back rested upon a Jesus-in-the-Garden-of-Gethsemane throw. Anna sat in the recliner next to the fireplace.

“I like it,” I said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Dad replied.

“No, I do.”

Garland walked into the living room. "I'm pee-shy in front of Jesus. Who knew?" he said.

I laughed. "How so?"

"*Jesus with Thieves in the Temple* is hanging above the toilet," Garland said. "I couldn't pee. J.C. looked angry. He made me nervous."

"Shhh. You're going to get us in trouble.," Beth said.

"How so? Garland asked. "We're the only ones here. Well, us and Jesus. So are you going to buy it, Grey?"

"I think I want to make an offer," I said.

"Well, just so you know, that throw your Mom is sitting on makes forty-four. There are forty-four pictures of Jesus in this house." Garland began to sing, "Take one down and pass it around, forty-three pictures of J.C. on the wall."

"How about we take this to the office," Anna said.

"Well, if you're going to make an offer I have one question for Miss Ann Bell Lee." Garland said. "Does Grey get Frankincense as a gift-with-purchase?"

"What?" Anna asked. Turning her focus to me she asked, "How about you and me go to the office and write up an offer?"

Two days after I made the offer on the Forrest Lane house I met Rosabelle and May at the Executive Inn. It was their favorite restaurant.

"So I told you I made an offer, right?" I asked, after placing my drink order.

“Yes. At least it’s on top of Mortgage Hill instead of below like your other house. No more waiting for the creek to rise during a rainstorm. Have you heard any news?”

Rosabelle asked.

“As a matter of fact Anna called today. You aren’t going to believe it.”

“Is that the Jesus house you were talking about? Was it Anna’s listing?” asked May.

“No. Valley Reality has it. Anna took them my offer the day before yesterday. The people, Thompsons, their son Trace works for us at the restaurant, they were asking \$175,900.00. Anna said she thought Valley Reality had someone also looking to making an offer. Of course I figured it was standard realtor rhetoric but I wanted to be safe. I wanted that house. That’s why I didn’t lowball the asking price. I offered \$169,900.00.”

“I know Roy and Lorraine Thompson. Roy’s little brother used to work at the orchard,” Rosabelle said. “Lorraine was a Nicholas. For years her family owned Nicholas Bridal Shop on Main Street. Lorraine’s older sister got pregnant at 15. She went away ‘to her aunt’s house’ at the beginning of her sophomore year at Harrison High. That next summer she came back empty handed. Everybody in town knew she’d given up the baby. Some suspected she had an abortion but she was gone too long for that; she missed the whole school year.” Rosabelle took a sip of her cocktail. “Was there really someone else interested in the house?” she asked.

“Yep. As a matter of fact there was. They made an offer. And the Thompsons accepted it. You’re never gonna believe it.”

“Really?” May replied.

“The Thompsons accepted the other offer because it was a family from their church. They accepted \$164,900.00,” I said.

“You’re shitting me?” Rosabelle replied.

May choked a bit on her screwdriver.

“Valley Reality told Anna both offers were on the table and they tried to convince Thompsons that accepting the lesser amount wasn’t how houses were typically sold. The Thompsons didn’t care. They took the offer, \$5,000.00 less than mine. Can you believe it?”

“Ah! They didn’t want a gay boy living on Mortgage Hill,” Rosabelle replied, lifting her cocktail to take a sip. “The Baptist Church strikes again.”

“You know Rosabelle I said the same thing. Anna doesn’t believe it. But I told her word is out, I’m back. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Well, their loss. You’ll find something, I’m sure.”

“Actually, I think the house across the street from my parents might be for sale. The old lady living there went to assisted living.”

“Are you talking about Coach Jacobs’ old house? They finally moved old Mrs. Jacobs out, huh? You know her husband died in the living room. Mrs. Jacobs’ went with her sisters for a long weekend of shopping in Chicago and when she returned four days later she found him on the floor, curled stiff. He’d fallen face first out of his La-Z-boy.

“Yeah, I’d heard that. But the house is in the area I want.”

“Well, hopefully your neighbors across the street won’t boycott your purchase,” Rosabelle said with a smirk.

“Funny. Real funny Rosa.”

Chapter Ten

Part II

- Feeding the Christians -

The Sunday before Christmas, after I'd somewhat settled into my house across the street from Mom and Dad, I began managing the restaurant again. I'd given most of my furniture away before leaving Miami Beach, keeping a few cherished pieces. Yet the guest room of my house had boxes stacked wall-to-wall, floor to ceiling. Christmas was one week away and the restaurant's banquet room was booked with holiday parties through Christmas Eve. Always, since I could remember, the holidays were a busy season for Daniels' Family Buffet. There was no time to unpack and organize, or to feel completely settled. My life would have to wait.

The restaurant had a well-practiced regimen. It accommodated 300 diners with an additional 130 in the adjoining banquet room. From the restaurant's 10:30 a.m. opening through late afternoon, during any given Sunday, the after-church crowd filled the place to capacity. Patrons paid before eating, the cash register served as check point. The rate at which customers entered could be controlled there. Bordering the main dining room a half-wall topped with etched glass created an aisle that forced hungry diners to fall in formation like soldiers at a mess hall. Packed in the aisle they twisted out the front door then doubled back along the sidewalk. Standing outside, the outstretched eaves of the angled green roof provided shelter in inclement weather as did the restaurant's porte-cochere covering the front entrance. From point of arrival to cash register, at the height of rush, customers could expect an hour's wait.

There were three buffets serving an assortment of Midwestern-style food: the Salad Bar, its iceberg lettuce and all the fixings along with prepared salads; the Steamtable with its hot vegetables, various meats, and selection of soups; the Dessert Bar, its assortment of homemade cobblers, bread pudding, pies, and soft-serve ice cream. Once they paid, customers lined each side of the buffets, some filling their plates while others patiently waited their turn. The restaurant's framed motto hung on the wall nearby: *Take all you want but eat all you take*. Plus smaller framed directives: *There is an extra charge for carry-out!*; *No doggie bags*; *Children under the age of 8 must be accompanied by an adult*. My Dad's favorite: *There ain't no place like this place anywhere near this place so this must be the place*. Both the restaurant staff and customers referred to this weekly bustle as our *Sunday Dinner Rush*. In Ft. Sackville, lunch was dinner; dinner was supper.

Virtually every Sunday before I resigned as restaurant manager ten years prior, Rosabelle called at 12:30 p.m. to ask in her smoky voice what was I doing? My response was always the same, "I'm just feeding the Christians." She called to check on me, to assess the status of my hangover, knowing most likely I'd been out all night with Kirk at *Teana Faye's* in Evansville – only an hour away, yet light years from Ft. Sackville. The thought of those days made me smile: a time when it felt like I was getting away with something; how I joked with her that if the Christians ever found out what I'd been doing in the wee hours before work, "Why, they'd run screaming," I'd say, "from this bacchanalia of sweet tea, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes."

"No shit," she'd say. "What time did you get home?"

"We rolled in about 5:30 a.m. The birds were chirping."

"Well, if you were home before the street lights went off you weren't out all night."

This Sunday I wondered if she'd call? If we'd pick up our routine where we'd left off a decade before.

Although I'd been gone ten years, jumping back into my old job was like I'd never left. In fact, everything seemed as though the last ten years never existed. With one exception: I'd been living as an openly gay man in Miami Beach. After my mother's frantic phone call, following my decision to return, I vowed with iron-fisted resolve to live the same way in my hometown. Prior to leaving Ft. Sackville, mine had been a dual life as if my soul were sliced in half, a secret section for me, my family, for Kirk and the other, more public section, for the restaurant, our employees, and Ft. Sackville.

That first Sunday back I was greeted by our customers as the long lost, prodigal son. *He's finally returned to God's country* it seemed they were saying. A few took no issue telling me they were happy I'd "moved away from all them foreigners down there." Most of our customers showered me with good wishes: *welcome back; we've missed you; the place wasn't the same with you gone*. I had, in their approving eyes, put my family first. That Sunday there were many reunions and pats on the back from families like the Cullens, the Wards, and the Everetts. Mr. Everett was one of the first.

The Everett family was from Parkman, Illinois. They were farm folks from across the Wabash River with lots of acreage, even more money, and larger appetites. Dad told me several years ago that oil had been discovered on their property. From that moment, Mr. Everett never had another care in the world. He could've quit; his family was more than capable of living off their investment residuals. However, Mr. Everett kept farming. His three boys did too. They all lived in Crawford County, Illinois' version of a Kennedy Compound. A vast complex of farmhouses, pole barns, grain silos, and a mechanics garage. Plus a large lake stocked with blue gill and catfish. Grandpa Collin fished there on several occasions.

The Everetts ate in the restaurant every Sunday. Their routine rarely wavered: mid-morning service at Parkman First Baptist Church, then filling three new SUV's with family they

drove fifteen miles to Daniels'. During the week, one or two of them would stop in for lunch after running errands or returning from a trip to Traylor Farm and Feed. Clearly, they bought their clothes at Rural King, a regional farm supply store located in the former Walmart. But on Sundays they wore J.C. Penney's best. To say the family was conservative is like saying corn is kind of a grain. Dad said Mr. Everett knew every dime he had. Over the years my experience found the family to be polite, respectful, not the least bit wasteful. Plus, they tipped well. Our server's jockeyed for them to sit in their section. More than once Dad joked he should pay the Everetts to stay away; we'd make more money. Those folks sure could put the food away.

That first Sunday was also the first day I had the opportunity to work with Trace Thompson, the 17-year-old, fresh-faced busboy who happened to be, I was told, one of our best bussers on the floor and in the dish-room. It was his parent's house and childhood home I'd tried to buy. His family was also regular customers at Daniels'. Trace was a talented singer. His dream was Broadway. He'd begun his ascent as lead in Harrison High School's glee club along with being star soloist in the youth choir at Wabash Valley Baptist Church. He sang often at weddings and funerals. As he was clearing a four-top I asked him to make his way to the banquet room when he was finished. "I'm sure they need help in there," I said. He tucked the chairs under the table then pushed his bus cart toward the adjoining dining room. He was one of the few bussers that not only stacked dishes neatly in his cart, allowing for easy unloading in the dish-room, therefore less breakage, but he also wiped off the chairs before leaving the table. As soon as Trace left Mr. Everett approached with his plate heaped high.

"It's sure good to see you back," Mr. Everett said. "This is where you belong. Nothing like having the family together again. Everybody 'round here's missed your laugh."

"Thanks," I said, shaking his free hand as he balanced with his other a plate of fried chicken, Swiss steak, dressing, noodles, green beans, sweet potatoes and dumplings. "Looks like

you've got all *your* family with you today." Across the dining room sat a twelve-top of Everetts: his three sons about my age, their wives, and four elementary and middle school-aged grandchildren. The senior Mrs. Everett smiled, then waved. I returned the gesture. Their table was already loaded with empty plates and bowls.

"Your grandkids sure have gotten big since the last time I saw them," I said.

"It's this good ol' southern cookin' that keeps 'em growing. Nothin' like Daniels' to fill a family up."

"Glad to hear it. I'll send a busser over to clear those empty plates. Be sure to leave room for dessert."

"Much obliged. Tell your folks I said hello. I don't see your dad much as I used to. It's good you're back."

"I'll tell them. Enjoy."

Mr. Everett's reception was typical. I wondered how long it would last. Rumors of C.J. Daniels' son being gay was one thing, a breach in my family's well-constructed levy could flood Daniels' restaurant legacy with a current of homophobia swifter than spring rains flood the Wabash River bottoms. There was potential I thought that being totally 'out' could destroy all my family had built. Kirk said I would have to face it sooner or later.

Later during the Sunday dinner rush I spotted Daryl Stone and his family sitting at a four-top on the opposite end of the dining room. Daryl was a year older than I, leading-man looks. A modern Montgomery Clift. He'd been quite popular in high school and starred on practically every athletic team. He excelled in golf and won a scholarship

to Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. His dad was friends with the university's golf coach there. Over the years I'd heard Daryl was born again, married, and had children. I'd also heard he'd returned to Ft. Sackville with his family to take the position of youth pastor for Wabash Valley Baptist Church not long after I'd moved to Miami Beach. I thought about the first time I saw Daryl Stone in the hallway at Vigo Junior High.

I joined chorus as an elective my 7th grade year at Vigo Junior High. However, it wasn't long before I figured out chorus was not cool. Ft. Sackville was a basketball town in a basketball state. The state, like the town, was divided into two camps: Purdue Boilermakers or Indiana Hoosiers. The fervor was not limited to college. High school basketball also ruled. Interest in the arts instead of athletics would get one labeled a 'queer' for life so I quit chorus after my first semester and strategically began to align myself with the popular athletes at school – the cool kids.

Daryl Stone was a year older than I, an 8th grader. I watched him move through the halls. He was smooth like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* with his penny loafers, demeanor, and black Ray-Ban sunglasses. Yet it wasn't until the summer between my 8th grade and freshman year of high school, during summer school P.E., that I was granted access to his inner circle.

Harrison High curriculum required two semesters of physical education, offering an opportunity to take the class for credit during summer mornings. Most students took

advantage of this, in order to participate in the various outdoor activities not offered during the school year. I took the summer option so I would not have to shower in the guys' locker room during school hours. I was still fearful of being naked in a room full of boys my age and older. And, unlike my grade school body spent learning to swim or play basketball at the YMCA, forced to change and shower in its locker room, my high school body had been developing, my hormones were raging and erections were something over which I had no control. Getting a hard-on in my high school locker room would be devastating. That, too, would get one labeled a "queer."

On that first day of summer P.E., I ate breakfast at the restaurant and then rode my bike to the school's football field a few minutes before 8:00am. After locking the frame of my Huffy 10-speed to the bike-rack I spotted everyone gathered around Daryl. When I approached I heard him say, "Dad bought it for me in Indianapolis." Daryl was showing off the latest sports version Sony Walkman radio and cassette player with ear-bud headphones. "It plays both sides. You don't have to take the tape out to switch anymore." I had wanted a Sony Walkman forever.

A few P.E classes later Daryl invited me to swim. We rode our bikes to his house after morning class. His family lived in the Ft. Sackville version of the suburbs outside of town. Other than my Aunt Charlene and her husband, the Stones were the only family I knew that had a swimming pool. Daryl's older brother, James, a Senior, drove a brand new red Trans Am with T-tops and always seemed to have people around him. Daryl's mom and dad were just as popular. Their house, designed by Mrs. Stone, had been custom built for entertaining. Mr. Stone owned a lucrative trucking insurance and freight shipping business. Rumors circulated around the county that the Stones' money came

from transporting drugs for which the business served as a front. It was the only way they could have “that kind of money,” people said.

Parked in their four-car garage was a restored 1957 pink Thunderbird, which Daryl said belonged to his mother. Her father bought it for her to take to college –she was a Northwestern graduate. Daryl’s parents met there. Alongside the Thunderbird was Mr. Stone’s restored black 1964 Corvette Stingray. A Cadillac Seville and Lincoln Continental served their everyday transportation needs. Daryl and I spent the afternoon swimming and soaking in the sun.

“Hey, you hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Want to get Strombolis from Bowman’s?”

“Yeah!”

Bowman’s Pizza on Broadway had been in business as long as our family’s restaurant. It was a staple in the community and a regular on many kitchen tables. We grabbed our towels from the deck and dried off.

Daryl disappeared for a moment then returned with car keys.

“Let’s take the Vette?”

“You’re going to drive?” Daryl didn’t have a driver’s license. While my other summer school course was Health and Safety, his was Drivers Education. Ironically Mr. Ledford, the P.E. teacher, was also the Drivers Ed., teacher. But Daryl had to pass Ledford’s class before he could get a driver’s permit and only then was he allowed to drive with parental supervision. His 16th birthday was still several months away.

“Yes. Mom and dad are at the office. Plus they’ve got their Tuesday tee-time at

the Elks. They won't be home until late." I followed Daryl to the garage.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I need to change clothes. My trunks are wet."

"Oh come on. Get in. It's no big deal. Really. Just put your towel in the seat."

The Corvette's hardtop hung from the garage rafters above us. I helped unlock the soft top and fold it back, securing it behind the two seats. We hopped in. When Daryl started the engine I could feel the car's power vibrate beneath my seat. The idling engine sounded restrained, first whining then rumbling.

Backing out of the garage, Daryl then pointed the car toward the long paved driveway and punched the gas. Its tires squealed; the sleek fiberglass body fishtailed a bit before the tires took traction and rocketed us down the drive toward the Stones' front gate, pinning my back momentarily against the passenger seat.

The Stone's driveway led to old Highway 41, a desolate 2-lane stretch of road with farm fields of ankle-high corn on one side and grazing cattle on the other.

"How fast do you think we can go?" Daryl asked, yelling above the sound of wind and Prince's *1999* blasting from the aftermarket Bose speakers and cassette radio, cows and corn passing in a blur.

"I have no idea."

"The speedometer registers 70. I bet we can redline it."

"Go for it!" I said.

Soon the Corvette was racing down the highway, its speedometer bouncing off the 70 MPH mark.

"You think we're doing a hundred?" he asked.

"I bet so," I said, gripping the bottom of my seat with my right hand. Ahead of

us lay the curved approach to the ‘new’ 4-lane Highway 41. “Think we should slow down?” I asked.

“Naw. Watch this. My brother does it all the time in his T.A.”

Approaching the ramp, having no real knowledge of how fast we were going and allowing no regard for existing traffic, the car railed down the on-ramp shooting like a pinball across the two southbound lanes, its speed sending the car into the highway’s median, its tires kicking up gravel and dirt behind us. Once Daryl gained control and steered the car back onto the pavement, keeping it between the lines of the inner lane, I looked behind us. Fortunately there were no other cars, just a brown dust cloud hanging in our wake.

“That’s fucking awesome,” I said, still white-knuckling my seat.

“It’s like a rollercoaster turn, sort of. Like The Beast at Kings Island. My brother can take it faster in his car.”

Secretly I was scared to death. Yet, my fear mixed with the thrill of being in Daryl’s presence would be the experience against which I’d compare all my friendships and future lovers.

Now there he sat in my family’s restaurant with a wife and two children. A youth pastor at Wabash Valley Church. It didn’t seem possible. I headed toward his table.

He didn’t see me approaching. “Daryl!” I said, somewhat startling him. “I don’t think I’ve seen you since graduation. How’ve you been?” I asked.

“Hey, Grey. I heard you were moving back,” he said, standing to shake my hand. “Grey, I’d like you to meet my wife Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Grey. We were classmates at Harrison.”

Classmates?

Daryl sat down then placed his hand on the back of the chair next to him, “This is Isaac and over there is Jacob.”

Did he really just say classmates?

“Nice to meet you, Grey,” Rebecca said. She had plain features, wore little makeup, and was dressed in a conservative consignment shop kind of way. She reminded me of that girl in every high school classroom who blends with her surroundings. The kind of girl, years later at the class reunion, one never remember going to high school with. Their twin boys looked maybe seven or eight years old. They were unresponsive to the introduction. Each had a fried chicken leg with his teeth sunk deep into the dark meat.

“Looks like the boys are enjoying themselves,” I said, trying to clear the word *classmates* from my mind. *He could have said, “we were best friends at Harrison” or “we were best friends once.”*

“Oh yes. Chicken legs and noodles are their favorite. We never have a problem getting them to eat here,” Rebecca said.

“So, the last thing I heard you were living in Virginia. Have you adjusted to Ft. Sackville? Must be quite a change,” I said.

“It’s lovely. Everyone’s so friendly. The church welcomed us with open arms,” she said, taking a napkin from the table to wipe pieces of fried chicken from her twin boys’ cheeks.

“I suppose I could ask the same of you,” Daryl said. “Have you adjusted to being back?”

Our conversation was interrupted by the restaurant’s public address intercom, the cashier telling me I was needed in the kitchen.

“Excuse me. It’s back to the old grind here. I guess you could say I haven’t had time to adjust yet. This place has been keeping me hopping,” I said.

Once in the kitchen I got stuck helping the cooks catch up on frying chicken, the vegetable oil in one of the fryers had burnt which required the fryer be boiled out and replenished with fresh oil. Boiling out a fryer was a process and often forced the fry cook to fall behind. He did. I was unable to return to the dining room for some time. When I did return Daryl and his family had finished their meal. He was waiting near the front door for Rebecca and the boys to come out of the restrooms. He was facing the wall of photographs that captured the fifty-plus years my family had been in the restaurant business and its involvement in the community.

Daryl seemed to be gazing at a photograph of Robbie Palmer and himself, both 17 years old, at a county high school golf tournament sponsored by the restaurant. It was Daryl and Robbie standing next to one another, each posed, Robbie’s left hand propped upon his golf club, Daryl’s forearm resting on Robbie’s right shoulder. Both wear big smiles. The photograph date: Summer 1985.

“Crazy pictures, huh? Some seem a lifetime ago. I guess many of them are,” I said.

My voice startled him. He quickly regained his composure. “There is quite a history here to maintain,” Daryl said, turning to me. “I figured you’d never leave Miami Beach. I hear it gets pretty crazy down there.”

“It can be. But, you do what you gotta do.”

“You *do* what God calls you to do.” Daryl suddenly looked like his dad that summer day we got caught driving the Corvette. *Was he reprovng me?*

Rebecca and the twins reappeared joining Daryl near the photographs.

Trying to disregard Daryl's pronouncement I said, "Hey! I think we might be coming to your church for Christmas service. Trace says he has a solo."

"He's such a good Christian boy. A lovely voice. God has called him," Rebecca said.

Daryl placed his arm around her shoulders. "Yes. We have big plans for Trace."

"He's a damn good worker. I know that. We could use more like him on the floor," I said.

"Trace has a future. He will serve the Lord, not restaurant diners," Daryl replied.

"Right. Well, I look forward to hearing him sing. It was nice meeting you, Rebecca. You too, boys." Isaac and Jacob still did not acknowledge me.

"I'll look for your face in the pew on Sunday," Daryl said before he followed his wife and boys out the restaurant's front door.

"Grey, you have a call on line one. Grey, line one," the cashier announced via the intercom. Opposite me, on the dining room wall of the restaurant office, above the dinner crowd hung a silver circular neon clock. Its turquoise glow drew my attention; its hands pointed to 12:30 p.m. Rosabelle had remembered. I laughed. She'd be disappointed. My Saturday night had been spent at home, alone. And, I'd gotten nine hours sleep.

Chapter Eleven

- A Fisher of Catholics -

After my phone conversation with Rosabelle I sat for a moment behind my Dad's massive oak desk in the restaurant office. It had a history; everything around me had history. The desk had been purchased at auction when Gimbel Bond on 2nd and Main Street, the forerunner to New York's flagship store, went out of business in the 1980's. It was a fixture in the store's Ft. Sackville office for forty years and had been one in ours for twenty. On it a bill for catfish fillets lay atop a stack of invoices from Friday's deliveries. Friday was fish day at Daniel's Family Buffet, as it had been at Daniels' Diner –Grandpa Collin's first restaurant.

Friday's lunch hour at the Diner was a fisher of Catholics. Being the second busiest lunch of the week, its swivel counter stools were filled with men in hats. A fleet of Fedoras docked at the restaurant's speckled Formica counter; the 50 seat dining room filled to capacity with businessmen, priests, and ladies who lunched. The Diner's popular Friday lunch menu often forced Grandpa Collin to lock the front door at the height of rush. For any number of customers leaving, only as many were allowed to enter. Diners would line the front sidewalk along Fairground Avenue between parked cars and the two-story brick flatiron building, sometimes angling around the corner onto 8th street. The smell of home-cooking enticed travelers from the train depot across the street.

On Fridays they did not wait long. Tables turned.

Waitresses in their starched white uniforms, lapel name tags, and black aprons darted between tables, behind the counter, through the kitchen's swinging doors like

albino worker ants carrying green band Buffalo china, glassware, hot cups of coffee, or the day's plate special: fried catfish fillets with all the fixin's and creamy Cole Slaw in monkey bowls.

One of those felt-Fedora-wearing-men sitting at the counter was a new salesman for The Ohio Valley Uniform Supply Company located in Evansville, Indiana. Later, when recounting the events of this particular Friday Grandpa Collin nicknamed him Red, because he'd never seen a man's face turn so bright a color. He looked to be in his thirties, about the same age as my grandfather. Perhaps he'd recently begun working for the company and was responsible for their southwestern Indiana territory. During the first few months he must have done his research, known Mean's Clean Towel Service -a local company- had been supplying the Diner since my Grandpa Collin bought the restaurant four years earlier.

Following Grandpa Collin's oft-repeated anecdote concerning Red's poor vision, always with a cigarette, he would contort his lips into a proud crooked smirk as he puffed then exhaled cigarette smoke.

Regardless, this Friday in 1955 Red must have timed his stop in Ft. Sackville precisely at noon to have lunch at Daniels' Diner.

The day-shift cook had called in sick and Grandpa Collin found himself in the kitchen working the grill. At the height of the lunch rush he spotted his waitresses gathered round the Fedora-wearing-man sitting at the end of the counter. Not one for pretense, my grandfather yelled from the kitchen, "Get your ass back to work." The waitresses quickly returned to business. Only moments later, when Collin again looked

up from the grill, the waitresses were once more gathered round the man, his cigarette smoke wafting above their huddled heads, circling his hat.

This time Collin stormed toward the congregation. One of the waitresses saw him approaching. She signaled the others. Attention was restored a second time to the Friday lunch crowd. Red, seeing Grandpa Collin for the first time, stood. He offered a handshake, introduced himself, tried to speak about the uniform business. Clean towels too. “You’ve got a great place here, Mr. Daniels; I’d really like the opportunity to be your supplier.”

“Mister, we’re covered up. You gotta leave my girls alone.”

“Absolutely. I was just showing them some of our latest styles. Where do you currently get your uniforms? I assume Mean’s is your towel supplier?”

“I don’t have time to talk. Neither do the waitresses. Looks like you’ve finished your lunch. One of the girls will bring you a cup of coffee shortly.”

Grandpa Collin returned to the kitchen.

In Ft. Sackville it was common knowledge that my grandfather hated two things: salesmen, and salesmen that took another paying customer’s seat.

But Red? He didn’t give up so easy.

Grandpa Collin had a reputation. He grew up during the depression, suffered abuse, knew hunger. He was a Navy man that could fight. Grandpa Collin did not suffer fools. If tramps riding the rails or vagrants wandering from town to town appeared at the restaurant’s back kitchen door, they typically got a meal. Grandpa Collin understood their kind. But salesmen? Forget it.

Red sealed his fate when Grandpa Collin, on the third occasion, looked up from the grill to see the waitresses gathered round him once again. Red had his uniform sales-book open, the waitresses' attention captured.

Grandpa Collin slammed his steak weight on the grill; the dining room went silent. When he again sailed through the kitchen doors, removing then throwing his grease-stained apron to the floor and approached Red from the service side of the counter, eating utensils paused.

“Get you ass out!” Grandpa Collin said.

Red stood.

Customers heard: “goddamnit”; “son-of-a-bitch”; “I’ll throw your ass out.”

Everyone began to stare at the Fedora-wearing-man now leaning over the end of the counter.

From the opposite side of the lunch counter Grandpa Collin grabbed Red by his collar and pulled him closer.

“His face was redder than a drunken Irishman. That son-of-a-bitch. Had *me* seein’ red. Which was more than he could see,” Grandpa Collin said. “That’s when I punched him.”

Gasps echoed off the Formica counter.

Grandpa Collin had knocked Red’s glass eye out of its socket. It rolled among those counter Catholics, pinballing between their plates loaded with Friday’s lunch special: fried catfish fillets with all the fixin’s and creamy Cole Slaw in monkey bowls.

The Friday rush was stunned silent.

When Collin picked up his apron and headed back to the kitchen, one of the waitresses handed Red not a guest check but his glass eye. He never came around again.

Grandpa Collin said as the bustle of the restaurant began to build once more, after Red made his way out the front door with his uniform sales-book under his arm, past diners looking in the front windows, that a voice from one of those counter men in hats said, “Eye for an eye, Collin? You’re a good Baptist!”

Chapter Twelve

- Trace Comes Out -

The Friday before Christmas I was sitting in the office totaling time cards when Trace walked in. It'd been a busy night, Trace was the only employee left and he had taken his time closing the dishroom.

"I just punched out. You want my card?" Trace asked.

"Yeah, I'll take it," I said. I added his to the stack.

"You mind if I hang out here a minute?" he asked.

"Sure. Go ahead. Sit down. But it is Friday night. Don't you have plans?" I asked.

"No, no plans. Just going home when I leave here."

I could sense Trace had something on his mind.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked. "It's kind of personal."

I stopped totaling hours and turned to look at Trace.

"You promise you won't get upset? You won't fire me?" he asked.

"Fire you? Why would I fire you? You're the best busser I've got. Mom and Dad talked to me about you over the phone long before I decided to come back."

I was pretty sure I knew where the conversation was going. I feigned ignorance.

"Shoot," I said.

"You know there are rumors you're gay." He paused. "Is that true? I mean if it is it's okay."

I laughed. “Thank you, Trace. I appreciate your vote of confidence. Yes, it’s true. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just... It’s just I’ve heard a lot of talk since you came back. Even before when people found out you were returning.”

“And I’m sure there’ll be more. Ft. Sackville’s not a town that minds its own business,” I said.

“Have you ever had any problems? I mean has anyone ever said anything to you? Tried to hurt you?”

“No. Not really. But you have to understand I wasn’t out when I lived here before. It’s the reason I moved. I wasn’t sure how to be gay here. If that makes sense,” I said.

He shifted in his seat. “What did your parents say when you told them?”

“That I was gay? Well, it was kind of fucked up. I was forced to tell them.”

Coming out to my parents is a moment etched into my very being. Like remembering where I was, what I was doing, who I was with when Princess Dianna was killed or when the Towers collapsed. To me the experience was monumental and terrifying.

“When did you come out to them,” Trace asked.

“It was Thursday, August 27, 1992.” Trace’s question took me back to that night.

Twenty minutes had passed since I’d called my parents’ house from mine and asked to speak with them and then driven to theirs. At nearly 11:00pm on a Thursday night I found myself standing at the foot of their bed, my chest as heavy as the oppressive August air outside.

How would I tell them?

My parents' master suite felt as if I were standing on the stage of a darkened movie palace, its grandeur barely discernible in the half-light, and lacking a visible exit. My mother's Waterford Crystal chandelier hung above me, ensconced in the coffered ceiling. It captured the solitary light in the room flickering from the television. I watched it hold the beams prisoner, dissecting colors inside the hand-crafted teardrop pendants. The only sound, low and coming from behind me, was David Letterman's interview with Tom Hanks about his new movie *A League of their Own*. Sitting up in bed, my parents were waiting for me to speak. All I could do was think about the earlier phone call from Chad, and how my future would be tethered to this night. The moment I confessed, nothing would ever be the same.

Their gaze was fixed upon me was like an unwavering spotlight. I'd seen the look before, their faces an impenetrable fortress when they felt uncomfortable or irritated, stoic expressions that could not be breached. The urgency in my voice earlier over the phone had tipped them off; this news would change everything.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

The silence was awkward, acidic like the sourness seeping up from my stomach; I could taste it in the back of my throat. I felt like throwing up.

"I met a guy. He's pretty angry with me, he's threatening to call you and tell you I'm gay."

Those weren't the words I wanted to use. The silence amplified. I began to sweat, beads formed on my upper lip and along my hairline. The back of my neck became wet and clammy.

"What I mean is, I met a guy in the spring. We hung out. He's the reason I went to Florida last month. I lied to you about my vacation. I didn't go to the Art Deco District in Miami

Beach; I flew to Tampa to meet him. He'd moved there from Evansville a couple of months after we met."

I couldn't breathe. Mom and Dad's faces were hard as a brick facade.

"The vacation didn't end well. He's pissed off. Says I owe him money for a parking ticket he got picking me up at the airport. He told me I need to send him money to pay for it or he's going to call you and tell you everything."

"Do you owe him the money?" Dad asked.

"No. I rented a car. He just parked there to meet me in the terminal. I had nothing to do with it."

My parents' eyes remained fixed.

"Why does he think you're responsible?" Dad asked.

"I don't know why. Something about his license being suspended. Says the ticket has to be paid or else there'll be a warrant out for his arrest. I really didn't ask questions."

My mother sat silent, motionless.

"How did you meet this guy?" Dad asked.

"At Chi Chi's in Evansville. He was a server there. I hung out in the lounge one night and we ended up drinking together. He invited me to go with him and some of his friends to a gay bar there. I went."

My legs were rooted to the floor, stiff. I wondered if my face looked like Mom and Dad's; mine felt like fear was written all over it. Was it showing?

My Dad let out a long sigh. "Well, you're not sending him the money."

“I didn’t plan on it. But I wanted to get to you guys before he did.”

That didn’t sound right.

“What I mean to say is I wanted to be the one to tell you,” I said.

“So, is this true? You think you are gay?” Dad asked.

“Yes. It is.”

He looked at my mother. There was a void in her eyes. She wouldn’t look at him and kept staring at me.

“I suppose it doesn’t surprise me,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I always kind of knew.”

The fear overwhelmed me. I didn’t want to have this discussion with them any further.

“Look, It’s not like we have to hang a banner in the restaurant tomorrow announcing it to everyone. Let’s just keep it to ourselves; I don’t want Cameron to know,” I said. “We’ll just talk about it later.”

“I agree,” Dad said.

“Good night,” I said, turning to leave.

“Grey? Don’t give that guy money,” Mom said.

“I’m not. I’m not talking to him again.”

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Dad said.

I hurried out of their bedroom, into the hall, down the stairs, and out the garage door to my car parked in the drive. *How would I show up for work tomorrow and face them?* Before reaching my car a viscid bile erupted from my stomach, knocking me to my knees in the neighbor's yard. Once I stopped throwing up, my stomach cramped from the convulsions, I could feel the front of my shirt soaked in the green syrupy mess. I took it off and stuffed it deep down into the neighbor's trashcan. Shirtless, I got in my car and drove home.

"Oh my God," Trace said. "Really? That is how it happened?"

"Really. That's how it happened," I said.

Trace was silent. I could almost see the wheels spinning in his head. His thoughts were visible on his face.

For a moment it seemed Trace had in his mind slipped out of our conversation. He'd gone somewhere deep into the recesses of his mind. Then he came back.

"I had no idea there was a gay bar in Evansville," he said.

"I didn't either. I had hoped one day I'd find one. I guess in that respect I kind of lucked out in meeting Chad.

"How so?" Trace asked.

I told Trace about how I'd met Chad in the lounge of the Mexican restaurant during an afternoon on my day off, that he was in his mid-twenties, about a year or two older than me, how he had spiky blond hair, glacier blue eyes, and a crooked smile that invited trouble and that his Nordic-look and lean 5'8 frame was noticeable in the brightly colored bar. "Chad greeted me with chips and salsa at the table and flashed his smile when I ordered a Corona with lime. I felt an attraction between us," I said. I didn't tell Trace that I know the feeling well; I'd felt it once

towards Daryl. Only then it had been a secret. “I watched Chad walk away after he took my order. I liked his walk,” I said.

I remembered feeling a tingle in the pit of my torso during those first moments when meeting Chad, a tingle similar to the ones I felt as a child during recess at LaSalle Elementary, laboring and pumping my legs, straining to fly higher and higher on the playground swings.

Chad returned with the beer. “So, what’s your name?”

“Grey.”

“Are you from here?”

“No. Ft. Sackville.”

“Ft. Sackville! Wow, small town. I’ve driven through it on my way to Indianapolis. Seems kind of redneck.”

“It can be, I suppose. Evansville is the big city.”

Chad grinned, “That’s funny. I never thought of Evansville as a city.”

I squeezed the lime into my Corona and took a sip.

“So are you in school?” Chad asked. “I had friends that went to Ft. Sackville Community College,” he said wrapping my spent lime in a cocktail napkin.

“No, my family owns a restaurant. I manage it.”

“That’s cool. What’s it called?”

“Daniels’ Family Buffet.”

“Oh. Lots of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, I bet?”

“You got it.”

“Must be nice to have your own restaurant. I’d rather own one that work in one. I’d be outa here if tips weren’t so good,” Chad said, scanning the lounge.

“This seems to be a happening place,” I said.

Two tables away a lady with her husband was trying to get Chad’s attention, waving her thumb and forefinger pressed together in the air as if holding a pen, signaling she wanted her check.

Listen, I’ve got to check my other tables. I’ll put in another Corona for you.”

“Thanks.”

I sipped my beer as Chad dropped a check at the woman’s table, then cleared cocktail glasses from another. The way he moved from table to table told the tale, he was a seasoned server. On his way to the bar he sailed past the big screen TV and switched the channel to *In Living Color*. The skit, with Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier, was a repeat in which their characters -- a parody of movie critics -- give two-snaps-up for a film they’re reviewing. Chad mimicked the zigzag arm motion of the effeminate characters with one hand while balancing his serving tray in the other. I giggled. When Chad reached the bar and dropped off the empty cocktail glasses he turned and looked in my direction. Again, he flashed *that* smile. It seemed he somehow knew I was watching him. My face warmed when I realized he was flirting with me.

Thank God I have another beer coming.

Chad returned with the fresh beer and a ramekin of salsa. Retrieving my empty Corona and placing it on his serving tray, he pulled out a chair to sit down, placing his tray on my table.

“Do you think she wanted her check?” he said sarcastically. “Glad she’s gone. She and her husband are regulars. Good tippers but they run my ass off. They must think this is the River House or something; I hate to tell them but this isn’t fine dining. They never order food, just fill up on chips and salsa.” He watched the couple disappear behind saloon-style doors.

“I guess I’m kind of doing the same,” I said.

“No, you’re cute. It’s Okay.”

I smiled, not knowing how to accept the compliment but enjoying it just the same. I had never experienced a situation like this, the open flirting from a guy. I had fantasized the scenario but never until this moment had it happened. As a small boy, long before I knew about sex, I remember seeing a teenage grill cook at the Diner who had a protruding Adams Apple. I thought it made the young man look tough; I knew then when I got older I wanted an Adams Apple. Somehow I knew from that moment I felt different. My interests were never similar to those of my cousins and I couldn’t ask my Dad. Although he loved and never laid a hand on me -- unlike the welts and bruises he’d received from Grandpa Collin -- he was quick tempered and easy to anger. On more than one occasion I found myself ducking a hammer or tool-turned-missile during home repairs or restaurant renovation. And I clearly remember the horrible death our plastic outdoor Santa suffered at his hands when it wouldn’t light up one Christmas. Always self-aware, I worked hard at trying to do or be what others expected, so the schoolyard bully wouldn’t beat me up like Dad had done to poor Santa. Or, I didn’t want to be like my mother’s cousin, Jerry.

My mother had a cousin in San Francisco and I remember the family talk of “Jerry the Fairy” and of Anita Bryant and orange juice. “The horror,” Grandma Augusta had said. “*Those people* throwing a pie in Anita’s face.” My Mom and Dad did not participate in the boycott; there was always a carton of Florida Fresh Squeezed in the refrigerator. Jerry and his friends were

getting their just desserts, Grandma Augusta had said. And years earlier, after Jerry came out to the family, *his* mother, my grandmother's sister, attempted suicide. But lately, for me, being in a supervisory position at the restaurant gave me some feeling of freedom and independence; I'd begun, subconsciously perhaps, seeking avenues to explore *my* feelings. Here I was in Evansville being served by a cute guy obviously interested in me. I enjoyed the feeling and the attention.

What's wrong with that?

"So are you staying in town tonight?" Chad asked.

"I hadn't planned to."

"I'm going out with friends tonight after work. You should join us."

"Where are you going?"

"To a dance club. Come along. You'll like it."

"What time are you meeting?"

"Probably 10:30pm or so. I'll need to swing by home, shower and change. Don't want to go out smelling like burritos."

"No. That wouldn't be good," I replied. "I don't know if I can sit here for five hours though. If I keep drinking I'll be blasted before you get off work." I scrambled for an excuse to stay. I really wanted to. "I do have friends who live east of here. I suppose I could pop by their place and visit them."

"It's a plan," he replied. "Be back about 10pm and we'll go from here."

"Sounds fun!"

"Want another beer?"

“Just one then I ought to go.”

“Ok, one more. After that you’re cut off, until later.” Chad winked.

I smiled. There was no way I was going to visit my friends. They would wonder whom I was meeting and what I was doing. I would drive the hour home, clean up, then return to Evansville before 10:00pm.

When I returned to Chi Chi’s the anticipation of the evening was like stepping outdoors into the charged air of spring thunderstorm riddled with lightening. It’d been a long time since I felt excited about meeting someone and going out and even then it was never like this. I’d dated girls in high school. Even as recently as six months ago I’d had one in my bed. It was never thrilling. The dates were boring. I usually got drunk, sex was about the mechanics -- void of feeling and emotion, as if I were following the instructions of the mysterious narrator’s baritone voice in the black and white Health and Safety films I’d watched in high school. Tonight however, I felt what I supposed my straight guy-friends felt when they were meeting a girl.

Having arrived on time and surprised by how busy the lounge was, I found a seat at the bar and ordered a Corona. The earlier beers had worn off hours ago. Chad was not working the lounge the bartender said, he had a section in the dining room and was about to get cut for the night. “I’ll let him know you’re here,” he said.

Not long after, just as I finished my second beer, Chad came into the bar and sat on the stool beside me, his black apron rolled tight and bulging with the busy night’s tips.

“I just cashed out. What a night! This place is crazy. Everybody must have Spring Fever. The first semi-warm day so far and the whole town decided to celebrate.”

He placed his apron on the bar and swiveled in his stool to face me. “How’re your friends?”

“Oh, they’re good. I showered and changed there,” I said.

“Great. Should we have one here or do you want to have one at my house while I get ready?”

“We can have one at your place.”

“I don’t have Corona, only Bud Light. That okay with you? If not, we can stop and pick up some.”

“Bud Light is fine.”

Partially unrolling his apron Chad pulled out a roll of ones, paid my tab, and then leapt down from the stool. I followed him out of the lounge watching his walk.

“My friends are going to meet us there. They’re not off yet,” he said as we strolled out the front door of Chi Chi’s under its colorful canopy, the sound of salsa music dancing into the clear night air.

“That’s cool. It’ll be nice to meet some new people.”

I followed Chad’s Honda closely in my convertible as we maneuvered beneath the orange sodium vapor streetlights to his neighborhood on the northwest side of Evansville. I only knew certain parts of the city: the mall, Chi Chi’s, the downtown area on the banks of the Ohio. He was definitely taking me into foreign territory.

When we arrived at the mid-century ranch house, and as Chad unlocked the front door, he told me he lived with his mother and younger sister; that he was going to school part time at the University of Southern Indiana; and living at home was cheaper than living on campus. His mom and sister were gone for a week visiting relatives. Entering the living room I sat on the sofa near the large picture window. "I'll get you that beer," he said, disappearing from the adjoining dining room into the kitchen. Returning, he handed me the ice-cold beer, "One for you and one for me." He popped his open. "Help yourself if you want another, they're in the fridge. I won't be long."

"Thanks. This is good."

As I sat down on the sofa Chad slipped down the hall toward the bathroom; soon after I heard him turn on the shower. I fantasized about joining him but instead I chugged my beer and grabbed another from the refrigerator.

We decided to take my car. Earlier Chad asked if I played pool. I said yes but chose not to explain that I sucked at the game. I'd shot pool with friends at The Pub in Ft. Sackville and usually lost. I didn't like the game but it seemed the only entertainment in southern Indiana bars, along with playing darts. Chad directed us to a neighborhood tavern on Franklin Avenue and after a few games, which he won, and a couple of beers, we sat down in a booth and order another round.

"So are your friends meeting us here?" I asked.

“No. They’re going to the Sho-Bar around midnight. Ever been?”

“Nope. This and Chi Chi’s are pretty much it.”

“It’s a gay bar down the street. They have a drag show on Wednesdays starting at 12:30am. I guess you’ve never been to one of those before,” he asked.

“No. I haven’t.” I could feel a tinge of unease rising in my chest. “I mean, I have no problem going. I just didn’t know there was a gay bar in Evansville.”

“It’s cool. You’ll like it. I mean it’s mostly gay but there are straight people too. Did you see *A League of their Own*? You know they filmed most of it here, right? The baseball field and the playoff scenes? The little kid, Stillwell-Angel, he’s from here. They had casting calls for extras and he got the part. Tom Hanks and Madonna rented houses out near McCutchenville. Anyway, some of the cast hung out there. I saw Penny Marshal and Rosie O’Donnell a couple times. Lori Petty and Madonna spray-painted their names on the wall. I got to meet Lori. She’s pretty cool.”

“Wow! I’d love to meet Madonna or Rosie. That’s awesome! My dad told me when he was younger that Joan Crawford ate in our restaurant. She was on a press tour; the train stopped in town. Our restaurant was across from the depot.”

“Christiana! Bring me the ax!” Chad said, parodying Faye Dunaway in *Mommie Dearest*. “Seriously, I promise you’ll like it. The dance music is great and the queens are a riot. I know a couple of them.” Chad picked up his beer. “Here, a toast.” I lifted mine and we bumped the longneck bottles together with a clink.

“To your first gay bar!”

“To my first gay bar.”

Sipping my beer I tried to mask my apprehension. *What if someone from Ft. Sackville is there?*

Walking across the street from the poorly lit gravel lot to the Sho-Bar, my anxiety level began to rise. The building, a grubby white two-story shotgun clapboard with a lean-to on its right side, clearly had been neglected among the post World War homes-turned-apartments and abandoned warehouses. The neighborhood seemed forgotten decades ago. Even the freight train that passed earlier seemed anxious to leave that part of town.

It never occurred to me that other people might be fearful of recognition. Of course, I hadn't completely made up my mind I was gay. I'd been living as I thought others expected for so long I didn't know how to be myself. For years I'd been a skilled chameleon. It seemed tonight however, my courage was breaking through. It was thrilling, like sitting in the last car of a rollercoaster waiting to crest and begin the ride. It seemed I'd always been following the steep incline of the cars ahead. But now *I* was peaking; *I* was at the precipice of an exhilarating descent. I followed Chad to the front door and silently commanded myself to stop being so worried –to continue enjoying the evening. *I could* walk into a gay bar. If someone I knew saw me I would deal with it. I was having fun with Chad; I liked him. And Chad was having fun also. It seemed he liked me too.

As we sat in a booth left of the dance-floor, under Madonna's fluorescent orange autograph, my attention was focused on the people in the bar. There were so many people my age and older. Wednesday nights the Sho-Bar attracted a large college crowd for cheap draft beer and shot specials. Tonight was no exception. Simultaneously I felt a sense of fear and adventure; perhaps the same adrenalin rush a soldier might feel entrenched behind enemy lines, trying to comprehend his position. Chad was concerned.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just trying to take it all in."

"You seem nervous. We can leave if you want."

"No. It's all right. I'm all right. I just didn't expect so many people."

"Wednesday nights are busy. Plus it's the weather. Everybody's ready to get out and have some fun."

"The music is cool. I like it. The bar too. It's just a bit overwhelming. I didn't realize there were so many gay people. I only know a few at home. They're not open about it. Not like this."

"Probably not," Chad replied. "I've met some people from Ft. Sackville here. Not many though. Of course not *everybody* here is gay."

"From Ft. Sackville? Here? Really? I can't imagine who it'd be. The only gay guy I know -- I knew -- was murdered. He was a year older than me."

"Murdered?"

"Yeah, Robbie—he was killed because he was gay."

Trace was captivated by my story.

“What did Chad say when you told him that?” Trace asked.

“I told him what happened,” I said. “Naturally, he was shocked that Ft. Sackville didn’t do anything about the murder. But he also understood the mentality. Anyway, Chad ended up being an asshole.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s a long story. I’m boring you with this. You need to go out and meet your friends, drink beer, road-trip, get into trouble. Do what other 17 year olds are doing. Don’t waste a perfectly good Friday night here with me.”

“Tell me,” Trace said.

“Well, the *Reader’s Digest* version is Chad ended up moving from Evansville to Tampa and invited me to visit. I hadn’t come out to my parents yet. I lied, told them I was flying to Miami Beach for a vacation. When I arrived Chad met me at the airport, at which point he told me he’d moved there and was living in the same apartment with his 19-year-old boyfriend. He had apparently told his boyfriend that I was just a friend. I knew nothing about Chad having a boyfriend. I don’t know what-in-the-hell he thought was going to happen. I don’t know what-in-the-hell *I* was thinking. It was the first time I saw Chad’s narcissism. Wait. That’s not true. I saw it when I first met him in Evansville; I thought it was sexy. In Tampa he just looked like an ass. I’ve often wondered if he thought all three of us were going to get it on? I had lied to my parents about where I was and didn’t have enough money to spend 10-days in a hotel. The only thing I could think was that I’d sleep on the sofa and make the best of it. It was a stupid decision but I was so desperate for gay male companionship I compromised my self-respect. Naturally things did not end well between Chad and me. To make matters worse he got that ticket at the airport for parking illegally.”

“Holy cow. What’d you do?” Trace asked.

“I stayed. What excuse would I give my parents for returning early? Two nights later we ended up arguing in a bar, Howard Street Station –it was a great bar! Anyway, I met and left with another guy, Mark. Mark saved my vacation. A total gentleman. He saw the whole sordid affair in the bar; I think he felt sorry for me. He’s the one that showed me a person could be normal *and* gay. He owned a pretty successful bicycle shop in Tampa.”

“What did Chad do?” Trace asked.

“Well, the next morning I went back to Chad’s apartment with Mark to get my things while Chad was at work. Thank God I still had a key. Chad had tried to stash some of my clothes in his closet and his washing machine, thinking I suppose, that I wouldn’t miss them. After we got everything, Mark and I went back to his condo and he spent the next few days showing me around the city. I came back home on schedule, no one the wiser. Mark and I tried to keep in touch but it didn’t work out, we lost touch. I wanted to lose touch with Chad but that didn’t happen.”

“Did he come back to Indiana?” Trace asked.

“No, nothing like that. Well, at least, not until a few years later. A couple months after I returned from vacation Chad called late one night; it was that Thursday night in August to be precise. He needed money to pay the parking ticket, to help reinstate his license. He wanted me to pay it. Said it was my fault he got it.”

“Did you send him the money?”

“Hell no! But that’s what forced me to tell my parents everything. He threatened to call them if I didn’t send the money and tell them about Tampa and that I was gay.”

“He was blackmailing you?”

“He tried. But I called his bluff. I got to them before he did. Mom cried for four days. It took a while for everything to get back to normal. Eventually it did. If you asked Mom and Dad now they’d tell you they’d rather be around gay people than straight people. Gays are more fun, they say.”

“Your parents are cool. My family would not be that cool.” Trace said.

Trace’s expression became vacant. I sensed he was trying to stem his pain. His watery eyes however, were unable to dam his distress. I knew that look. His fear. I had been where he was.

“Trace, are you OK?” I asked.

He shook his head no. A recalcitrant tear slipped down his cheek.

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

He covered his face with his hands and started sobbing.

I reached across the corner of the desk and placed my hands on his wrists. “Trace. Trace. Shhh. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay,” I said.

“No. No, it’s not. I don’t want to be this. I don’t want to be this way,” he said, his words choking in the back of his throat. I moved from my chair, kneeled beside him, and put my arms around him. He placed his head on my shoulder. I could feel his tears soaking my shirt. “I keep praying for God to take it away. Or to take me away.”

“It’s okay. Don’t say that. You’re okay. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

Trace continued sobbing. He was frightened. *Why did I have to bring up Chad? I could kick my ass.* Using Chad as my example for coming-out, with a young man struggling to accept his orientation, was stupid. I had added to Trace's fear.

I pulled back from Trace. I raised his chin with my thumb; I looked into his eyes. "Trace, not all gay guys are like Chad. It's like everything else, there are wonderful people and there are assholes."

"That's not it," he said. "I don't know how I can ever tell my parents. They're not like yours. And Pastor Daryl? He's going to freak."

"Listen. You don't have to do anything. The only thing you have to do right now is breathe. Just breathe." I paused a moment then nodded a silent *okay?* "And you don't worry about Pastor Daryl. He's got his own issues."

I gave Trace a handful of napkins stacked on the corner of the desk

"Look. I understand. I swear I do. And I'll do whatever I can to help. But you have to know something. You're okay. There's *nothing* wrong with you. You're intelligent, good-looking, talented ... so fucking talented, and a hell-of-a-worker. You're going to be successful. There's no doubt about it. You can be everything you are, everything you want to be *and* be gay. It's part and parcel."

"How'd you get through it?" Trace asked.

"It takes time. And a good friend. I had Rosabelle. And you have me. Okay? You understand what I'm saying?"

"I feel so fucked up. Like I'm going to burn in Hell," he said, placing his face in his hands again.

“Trace, you’re not going to burn in Hell. Your orientation, whom you choose to love, has nothing to do with Heaven or Hell. Look at me,” I gently pulled his face from his hand, again turning his chin with my thumb toward me to look him in the eyes. “Heaven and Hell are about compassion. How you treat yourself, how you treat others. I’ve seen you. I see the way you interact with customers, your co-workers. I’ve heard about your involvement at church. You are a compassionate guy. Right now, you need to show *yourself* some compassion. Okay?”

“Please don’t tell anyone. Please.”

“Trace, I’m not going to say a word. I promise. But I don’t want you struggling with this alone.”

I grabbed a pen and a napkin.

“Here’s my home number. I know you have my cell. You call me anytime. Day or night. Ask me anything. You’re not alone. No matter what happens, you remember that. You’re not alone.”

I thought about Daryl. Pastor Daryl Stone. What would he think when he found out Trace was gay? Trace was right to be concerned, his family was involved in the Wabash Valley Baptist Church, the same church that conducted a character assassination on Robbie Palmer after his murder and all but branded his mother and sisters with a scarlet H for being the family of a homosexual. Trace’s parents adored Pastor Daryl –everyone at Wabash Valley Baptist Church did. It was the largest church in Ft. Sackville. I was concerned for Trace. Daryl, it seemed, had forgotten our long weekend on Captiva Island. Apparently Daryl was good at denial. I was sure he would deny that Trace was gay and he would counsel Trace’s parents if Trace ever came out to them. After all when Daryl first introduced me to his wife that first Sunday back at Daniels’ he’d told her he and I were *classmates*. I however, remember my friendship with Daryl differently,

more than just *classmates*. Our friendship became more involved during my junior year, his senior year in high school after our long weekend at his parent's beach house on Captiva Island.

Chapter Thirteen

- Captiva Island -

Daryl Stone's dad had his pilot's license. He also had a single engine Cessna Skyhawk P, which provided comfortable seating for their family of four as he shuttled them to and from golf tournaments, sporting events, and family vacations, including their beachfront Florida home on Captiva Island. My junior year, Daryl invited me to join his dad and him for a long weekend at their house on the island.

"Mom, I'll only miss three days of school. Mr. Stone is flying us down," I said, sitting at the breakfast bar watching her fix dinner.

"In their plane? Absolutely not!" she said. Everybody in town knows he's been experiencing blackouts."

"Blackouts? What are you talking about?"

She turned from the stove to face me, wooden spoon in hand. "You Dad hears the CC boys talk. Mr. Deem, the president of American First drinks coffee with them every Saturday. Not long ago Daryl's dad applied for a business loan to invest in a fleet of semis, the bank considered not loaning him the money, at least not until Doc Vonderbreck figured out what was going on. Walt's health seems precarious."

"He's all right. Nothing's going to happen. I saw three of the new semis at their warehouse."

"We don't know that. I'll have to talk to your Dad first. You're not getting in a plane with him piloting until I have some proof and peace of mind."

When my Dad got home later that night after the restaurant closed I brought up the subject again.

“I haven’t heard anything about his health recently,” Dad said. “I tell you what, tomorrow I’ll call his office, get the 411 about the trip from Walt himself,” Dad said.

“Ask him how he’s been feeling,” Mom added.

“Yes!” I said, not in agreement with Mom but in victory. I knew Dad would work it out.

Two weeks later on a cold, grey and rainy weeknight I found myself on the tarmac of the Ft. Sackville-Parkman Airport, sitting in my parents’ car listening to my mother’s bevy of instructions. The rural Illinois airport across the Wabash River from Indiana, formerly an Army air training school during World War II that turned out some of the best pilots in the nation, on this day provided for me the portal to a temporary south Florida escape; for my mother it provided heart palpitations. I hadn’t been to Florida or seen the ocean since I was a young child during a trip to Daytona Beach then Disney World. This was going to be a ‘real’ trip to Florida. I couldn’t wait.

“Be a good guest. Pick up your underwear in the bathroom, hang up your bath-towel, make your bed. Use some of the money I gave you to buy dinner or lunch one day for Mr. Stone and Daryl, if you eat out. If not, offer to chip in on groceries. Take care of yourself and be safe,” Mom advised.

“We’re going to be on an island, Mom. We’re just hanging out at their house and on the beach. It’s no big deal.”

“In any event, you just be aware of your surroundings.”

“Grey, listen to your mother. Be careful, have fun, and call us when you land,”

Dad said.

“Yes! Call us the moment you land,” Mom said.

From the hanger Daryl waved for me to come in. Mr. Stone walked toward my parents’ car. Dad rolled down his window.

“You all ready to go, Grey?” Mr. Stone asked.

“Yep. My duffle bag is in the trunk,” I said.

“Great, get it out and take it in to Daryl, he’ll load it with our bags.”

“How long is the flight, Walt?” Dad asked.

“About 6 hours give or take. Depends on refuel stops and how quick they are.”

“How many times will you stop?” Mom asked. Not only was she concerned about Mr. Stone blacking-out in-flight but also the number of takeoffs and landings we’d be making.

“About three or four, depending on the weather. Looks like it’s going to be a nice night for flying,” he said.

“You’ve got my baby with you,” Mom said.

“Yes, Dessa, I do. Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine. I’ll make sure Grey calls when we arrive in Ft. Myers.”

I kissed Mom and Dad goodbye, hopped out of the backseat, retrieved my bag from the trunk and ran toward Daryl.

Inside the plane I sat in the backseat, Daryl was in the co-pilot's seat. Each of us put on headphones so we could communicate. Mr. Stone started the engine and the propeller began to turn. It began spinning so fast it became invisible. Soon we were taxiing down the runway, then aloft. I could see my parents' waving from the car below. I knew they were worried, yet I was thrilled. The hangers, former Army air-training classrooms, Quonset huts, and the airport runway grew smaller and smaller.

"Do you want to fly over Ft. Sackville?" Mr. Stone asked. "See what it looks like from the air?"

"Absolutely," I answered.

"It looks cool to see it from so high up," Daryl interjected. He seemed comfortable in his role as co-pilot. Although it occurred to me, *has he ever taken lessons?*

When we flew over our town I was able to see bits and pieces through the winter rain clouds. I spotted the Wabash River, Main Street, the restaurant, and my parents' house on Peach Orchard Lane. From the air Ft. Sackville was insignificant. Brown and gray parcels of dead farm ground with a tiny brick toy town in the middle. It looked abandoned, forsaken in the dim dusk of that January evening. In my mind there was no doubt about it, Florida would be better.

We arrived at Southwest Florida Regional Airport in Ft. Myers around 10:30pm. While Mr. Stone completed final arrangements for the plane I called Mom and Dad from the executive terminal to let them know we had arrived, Mr. Stone had a car waiting. Daryl

and I grabbed the bags and loaded them into the trunk of the Lincoln Town Car. After leaving the airport Mr. Stone drove past golf courses and gated communities arriving shortly thereafter on the Sanibel Causeway to Captiva. The air was alive, warm and dry. All around me there was life and neon colors. Even at night south Florida was vibrant and alluring. Arriving on the island, I could smell the salt air wafting through the car's sunroof and see pine and palm trees, Ficus and Banyans creating a canopy over the two-lane road.

"I've got a 8am tee time," Mr. Stone said. "I'll walk down to the store tomorrow morning and get breakfast. It'll be in the kitchen when you boys get up. Grey, are you a coffee drinker?"

"No, I'm more of an OJ guy," I said.

"Well you're in the right state. OJ it is. Daryl, I'll leave cash on the counter for you and Grey."

"Yeah. I thought we'd take the bikes tomorrow, gonna show him the island," Daryl said.

"You play tennis, Grey?" Mr. Stone asked. "South Seas Plantation has great tennis courts."

"Not really," I said.

"That's Okay, we've got plenty of racquets. I'll teach you," said Daryl.

The car slowed as we approached a sandy one-lane road. Turning left, we passed small cottages on either side built on pilings, a few with, I assumed, their owner's cars parked beneath. The Stones' house was the last on the lane. A cottage larger than the others but not on pilings, theirs was raised a few feet from the ground yet too low to park

a vehicle underneath. After the car stopped, I opened the back passenger door and was greeted by the roar of the ocean's surf –its rhythmic ebb and flow pounding the beach. The Gulf of Mexico was less than 50 yards from me.

“Pretty cool, eh?” Daryl asked, approaching from behind, shaking me from my momentary trance.

“This is awesome! Not what I expected,” I said.

“What'd you expect?” he asked, lifting the trunk lid.

“I don't know. I don't know what I expected. It wasn't this. This is better.”

“Wait till you see the beach in the daytime. There's a huge log over there that washed up after a hurricane one summer. A couple of years ago Christy Brinkley had her picture taken on it for the Sports Illustrated Swim Suit edition. Grab your bag.”

I grabbed my duffle bag, shut the trunk lid and followed Mr. Stone and Daryl into the house.

The living room, dining room, and kitchen of their beach cottage was open and spacious. Facing the west wall floor to ceiling windows and French doors framed the moonlit gulf. To my right, near the master bedroom door was a fireplace. Bookshelves filled with seashells flanked each side. I walked over and picked one up. Written in marker were James' and Daryl's name along with *Christmas '79*.

Mr. Stone had already vanished into his bedroom. I asked Daryl, “What's this?”

“Every visit we collect a seashell and sign our names, date it then add them to the collection. You and I can look for one tomorrow and sign our names,” Daryl said.

Turing again toward the windows, to my left was a hall door, giving access to the guest bathroom and two guest bedrooms.

“We’ll put our bags in my room. It’s the one to the right. It faces the ocean.”

Daryl said.

“We’re sleeping in the same room?”

“Yeah. The bed is big enough. It’ll be easier than making two beds.”

I don’t remember falling asleep but I was awakened to sunshine streaming through the open bedroom windows, the sea breeze sifted by the window screens, puffed up the linen curtains like white sails above the headboard. Daryl was rousing beside me.

“Are you awake? I asked.

“Yep, you?”

“Yeah.

“Race you to the ocean!”

“What? OK. But I gotta unpack my swim trunks.”

“No you don’t. It’s a private beach. James and I always run out in our underwear and jump in. It’s a ‘first-morning-here’ tradition. We’ve been doing it ever since I can remember.”

Daryl threw back the covers, was up and out of the bed before I realized what was happening. He darted toward the bedroom door in his white Calvin Klein briefs. I followed behind in my Fruit-of-the-Loom. We ran through the living room, Daryl threw open the French doors, and together we sprinted up the path through the sea oats, across the sand to the water. The tropical morning sun hung white in the sky, its diamond light

danced and dipped atop the silver gulf. Daryl was the first to leap headlong into the water. When I jumped in, the water pierced my every pore like icy pin pricks.

“This is the way to wake up!” Daryl said, bouncing up and down in the placid water.

“Holy shit it’s cold!” I said, having surfaced near him.

Daryl laughed. “Of course it is, silly, it’s January.”

“I thought the ocean was warm all year around?”

“No. It won’t start getting warm until late March, early April. In August it’s like bathwater. By the way” he paused, “the real tradition is to get your guest to jump into the cold water. James and I never do this unless we bring someone that’s never been.”

“You tricked me?”

“Yep. Sure did. And you fell hook, line, and sinker. In your underwear!”

I trudged toward Daryl and jumped him, pulling him under. We wrestled back and forth, playing in the salty water, the silk sand beneath our feet. His legs wrapped in mine, our arms flailing about trying to pin one another, splashing, laughing, swallowing salt water, choking, spitting, laughing more, his chest pressed against my back, mine against his.

After our morning swim we retreated from the water and toward the house. Affixed to the south side, jutting from the clapboard exterior wall of the beach-house and somewhat secluded by a tall hedge of Ficus was an outdoor shower.

“Go ahead, shower over there, I’ll grab us some towels,” Daryl said pointing.

“Outside?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s no big deal. No one’s going to see you.”

I walked to the side of the house and turned on the water. It was warm; I stepped out of my wet underwear and beneath its rain-shower. This was the life. Daryl soon appeared with towels.

“Looks like someone’s been in cold water,” he said smirking.

“Well, yeah. That water was freezing. You’re not looking so blessed yourself standing there in your dripping CK’s,” I said.

Daryl approached. “Here, grab a towel. Dad bought doughnuts. There’s OJ in the fridge.” I stepped out of the shower leaving the water running and began to towel off. Daryl peeled off his underwear and stepped in. His water-slicked black hair and body glistened in the sunlight, the tiny prism-like droplets from the shower streaming across his smooth taut skin, descending the curves of his triceps, forearms, thighs and calves, tiny beads trapped in the smattering of his dark chest and pubic hair. Daryl was an athlete: track, cross-country, tennis, golf, and varsity basketball. I wished my body looked like his. Walking away, my towel wrapped round me, carrying my underwear, I took one last glance behind me at Daryl showering. I definitely wanted a body like his. I really liked him.

“Hey,” Daryl yelled from the shower, “Remember, we’ve go to find a seashell.”

Chapter Fourteen

- He is the Light that Shines -

Christmas Day Daniels' Family Buffet was closed. It had been a busy week of holiday parties, not to mention Trace Thompson's coming out conversation two nights earlier. All things considered it seemed I had not lost a beat during my ten-year absence as general manager. The restaurant was in my blood. I was looking forward to spending quiet time at my parents' house – Mom, Dad, Cameron, and me. It was the first Christmas holiday we'd spent in Ft. Sackville in some time. For several years, before I left the restaurant, we vacationed on Marco Island, having closed the restaurant the week of Christmas through New Years, and driving on the December 25th to avoid traffic. More recent family holidays, after I'd moved to Miami Beach, were spent at my apartment there. This year, Mom pulled out all stops. She had the house decorated, cooked dinner, and arranged for us to attend Christmas service at Wabash Valley Church of God.

Mine was not a regular church-going family; we hadn't been regulars since my brother was little. The restaurant consumed our lives. But Mom had grown up in the church; she often recalled going to First Baptist during her youth in Hartwell, Indiana. Aflame in her memory were the rainbow colored stained glass windows. The sacred panes reminded her of *A Christmas Story* and the Christmas tree decorated in colors that “blaze like a Baptist window.” My Mom read *A Christmas Story* to me when I was in grade school; it was the genesis of my reading love affair with Truman Capote and it's why I taught his short stories at Everglades High in Miami Beach. The story reminds *me* of Christmas past with Grandma Dixie. Mom always said it reminded *her* of Christmas in Hartwell as a little girl.

Christmas had been my favorite holiday. Before leaving Ft. Sackville and the restaurant, holiday parties at the house in which Kirk and I lived on Kelso Creek Road were legendary: a carefully cultivated guest list (only those trusted), food catered by the restaurant, preferred cocktails mixed to perfection by the bartender –Hurricanes being the house special. Every year I had Hurricane Mix shipped from Pat O’Brian’s in New Orleans and served in Pat O’s signature glasses. This year I’d planned no such party. My Christmas things and Hurricane glasses were buried somewhere in the guest room boxes.

Mom wanted to kick off our family Christmas by attending Wabash Valley Church of God to hear their youth choir and show support for Trace. So after a busy Christmas Eve at the restaurant plus a restless night’s sleep, that morning I showered, tidied up the house, then walked across the street to my parents’. Mom had breakfast on the table: a family favorite of biscuits and gravy, baked ham, and fried potatoes. We ate, then loaded ourselves into their Cadillac STS. Dad sat in the front seat with his portable oxygen tank. Mom and Cameron were in the back. I drove, arriving just in time for 11:00 a.m. service.

When we arrived the parking lot was packed. “See, there are other Christmas Sunday Christians,” I said.

“I hope they don’t drag this goddamn thing on for two hours,” Dad said. “It’s the one day I get to relax at home and not worry about the restaurant. Which reminds me, Grey, after this we need to swing by, check the coolers.” My Dad often worried our walk-in coolers and freezers would suddenly shut down, resulting in a substantial loss of product. He worried about a lot of things.

Wabash Valley Church of God was a striking antebellum, three-story red brick structure. Wide steps lead from the street to five white columns, supporting its gabled roof. Behind the massive pillars, three white double doors gave entrance. The multiple two-story windows on each

side of the building depicted Biblical scenes in a kaleidoscope of colors. Inside, beneath the white domed cupola, which allowed dusty sunlight to filter down, oak pews were filled with parishioners in the theater-style sanctuary. When I was little we attended Sunday services regularly. I preferred to sit in the balcony. I liked watching the people below.

For Christmas service we sat on the main level near the middle. The sanctuary was bursting; we took the remaining seats. Many of the faces among us were Daniels' Family Buffet regulars. Same crowd, different place.

Beyond the main level pews was the raised pulpit. Reverend Damien's podium stood stage center. Behind it were risers with chairs for Daryl's youth choir. To the right of the pulpit was the organ, to its left the baptismal. As a little kid I thought the baptismal was an old indoor swimming pool, smaller than the one located in the basement of the YMCA downtown.

Plant pots wrapped in green foil held poinsettias. Their placement alternated in color like red and white footlights along the stage. Near the baptismal pool was a mammoth Christmas tree constructed of red poinsettias with a silver star placed on top.

As we settled in our seats the organist began to play the choir's entrance queue: *Adeste Fideles*. They filed on stage from the wings, taking their place, standing in front of their chairs. All of them wore white robes with the exception of Trace; he stood in the center of the choir wearing red. The organist began to play; the chorus united in a medley of traditional Christmas hymns.

Mom's face was beaming.

Following the medley of Christmas songs was Trace's solo, *He is the Light that Shines*. His performance was met with a rousing ovation from the parishioners. Mom, Dad, Cameron and

I stood with the crowd applauding and cheering. It was the first time I'd heard Trace sing. He was indeed star material.

After the choir, Reverend Damien walked onto the stage, taking his place at the podium. With a side-glance to the choral members, clasping his hands together against his chest, he said, "Thank you, choir. Thank you for sharing your angelic voices, your gift from God, with us on this blessed day." Then he turned to face the sanctuary. "How about that, ladies and gentlemen? Praise Jesus!"

"Praise Jesus," the parishioners responded.

Turning his attention to the organist, he said, "Mrs. Boil, you've given glory to God with your commitment to these fine young men and women."

Again, the parishioners erupted in applause. Pastor Damien returned his attention to the packed house.

"Pastor Daryl, you and Mrs. Boil should be proud. You've done a wonderful job yet again this year with our youth. Come on up here, Pastor Daryl. Give him a hand, ladies and gentlemen!"

In the front pew, on our side of the sanctuary, Daryl Stone sat with his family. He rose, turned, then waved to the parishioners as he made his way up the steps to join Reverend Damien. The parishioners went crazy. Pastor Daryl was a Wabash Valley Church of God rock star.

"Thank you, Reverend Damien. It's always a pleasure to guide our youth into the light of Christ," Daryl said.

"What news do you have for us today?" asked Reverend Damien.

"I have good news of great joy! Christ is born! Hallelujah!"

Reverend Damien and the parishioners shouted, “Hallelujah!”

After he hugged Daryl, Reverend Damien retreated to his chair near the pulpit’s right proscenium. The youth choir sat in the riser seats. I whispered to Mom, “Had I been asked in high school, I would’ve never guessed Daryl would be a preacher.”

The churchgoers were captivated by Daryl; I thought about how he once had captivated me. He was charming, his smile bright and warm. I suppose there was some resemblance, some trait he had to which I was still attracted.. Daryl had *it*; Kirk had *it*. Whatever *it* was?

Among the many things I loved about Kirk, his *it* made sex with him extraordinary, as if our bodies were built to fit each other’s.

Six months into my relationship with Kirk and after Rosabelle’s Christmas Party that same year I decided to get an HIV test. My decision wasn’t generated by fear that Kirk might be HIV-positive. It was because I’d been promiscuous during the year before I met him. Since coming out to my parents in my early twenties, I found myself reinventing my youth, a sort of second high school as I thought it should have been. I was dating, having sex, drinking, flirting, and dancing. The gay bars in Evansville, followed by Louisville and Indianapolis, became my secondary education. I met many gay men out of town.

In Ft. Sackville though, I knew only of two, Eric and Kevin, hair stylists who owned their own salon. Most folks in town considered them “just friends” even though they were rumored to be lovers. They ate in the restaurant occasionally and to me they seemed a novelty. I was intrigued by how they moved through the restaurant with one another. How did they manage, I wondered, in the community? Kirk and I had been invited to Rosabelle and May’s annual Christmas party, our first time as guests in their home, and I knew Kevin and Eric would be there. It was during the Christmas party I first had a conversation with Kevin.

Standing in front of Rosabelle’s 1950’s replica kitchen table loaded with fruit platters, cheese and cracker trays, BBQ sausage links, sliced ham and other Midwestern holiday hors d’oeuvres she asked, “Grey, do you know Kevin and Eric?”

Turning her attention to them she introduced us, “This is Grey, and his friend Kirk.”

“We’ve never been formally introduced,” I said. “I’ve seen you in the restaurant.”

“Yeah. Neon Noodle Day. We love the Thursday buffet,” Kevin said.

“Neon noodles?” I asked.

“Or Nuclear noodles,” Eric said, without expression.

“That’s what we call them,” Kevin said. “Sometimes they glow. Too much yellow food coloring, I suspect.”

“That’s funny,” said Rosabelle. “Grey’s Aunt Charlene and I used to eat in the Diner before it closed and her family opened the Buffet; before she married, during our running around days. I can’t say our noodles were ever glowing, although I’m certain we

were from too many cocktails. Daniels' Diner was our last-stop-before-home; our hangover cure after a wild night at the Executive Inn. Preventive medicine, you know."

"Nothing like comfort food to weigh down the booze," I said.

Turning my attention to Kevin I continued, "I never thought of calling them 'neon noodles.' Pretty catchy. The cooks do get crazy with the coloring sometimes, especially when we're training a new one."

Kevin extended his hand to shake Kirk's. "Nice to meet you," Kirk said.

"So you're not from here. How'd you end up in Ft. Sackville?" Kevin asked.

Kevin's friend Eric stood, rather uninvitingly, on the other side of the table. He was distant, somber. Not given to a celebratory mood.

"Boys, you'll excuse us. C'mon, Eric, let's go smoke a cigarette," Rosabelle said.

"I thought you'd never offer."

Rosabelle and Eric walked out the kitchen's back door and onto her winter garden patio sprinkled with Christmas lights.

"I live in Evansville. Well, west of it. Mt. Vernon," Kirk said.

"No wonder I didn't recognize you. I know all the cute boys around here," Kevin said.

"Oh really?" I asked.

"Yes. *You've* been on my radar for sometime."

"Me? You knew I was gay?"

"Oh, please. Only a gay guy could pick out *that* carpet in the restaurant."

I laughed. "Well, I appreciate the compliment, I think, but it was my Mom's decorator. It does work, though," I said. "Hides food stains."

“So are you and Kirk together?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. We met about five months ago,” Kirk said.

“Yeah. At Teana Faye’s.”

“Eric and I’ve been there. Back in the day we spent most of our time at Sho-Bar when it first opened. The East End before that.”

“So you and Eric are lovers?” I asked.

“At one time. Not anymore. We’re just roommates and business partners now.”

May, wearing her Santa hat, entered carrying a Santa tray filled with green and red Jello shots. “Shots! Get you shots here,” she announced. Kevin, Kirk and I each selected red ones. “Use your tongue, boys,” she said as we sucked the jiggling liquor from the one-ounce Solo cups. The red tasted of Hot Damn. Fiery. As May continued toward her living room guests she exclaimed, “Shots! Santa’s got shots here!” while we placed our spent crinkled cups on the kitchen table.

“Can I ask you a question, Kevin? Have you ever had trouble? I mean, has anyone ever treated you bad or done anything to your business because of you and Eric?”

“You mean because we’re gay? No. I can’t say they have. But for the most part Eric and I keep a low profile. If we go somewhere it’s usually out of town. Well, that is, we did when we were together. Still do, some. Mostly we keep our business separate from our pleasure, if you know what I mean,” he said, winking at Kirk.

“Grey’s afraid the Ft. Sackville boogiemer is going to get him,” Kirk said, squeezing my upper arm.

“No. It’s not that. I’m just trying to figure this out. It’s a how-far-can-I-go sort of thing,” I said. “Like tonight. I wanted to bring Kirk. But I know not all my friends will be like you guys.”

“You’ll be fine. Just don’t strut down Main Street holding hands. Listen, why don’t you and Kirk come over some time? Eric’s leaving soon and it’s going to be me all lonesome in that big old house.”

My attention was drawn to the kitchen door window where outside, beyond it, Rosabelle and Eric stood smoking, facing each other. Eric seemed rapt in his conversation with Rosabelle, his hands underscoring his animated facial expressions. Kevin said Eric had been rather depressed because Eric was leaving Ft. Sackville and moving to Indianapolis. “He’s been in such a dark mood lately,” Kevin said. “Anyway, we’ll have cocktails and hang out.

“That sounds fun,” Kirk said.

“Yeah. Let’s do that,” I said.

After that night I felt it might be possible for Kirk and me to be together in Ft Sackville. The party seemed to welcome us into some sort of alternative Ft. Sackville. A secret society.

A month later, a week after my 24th birthday, when the restaurant received the day’s newspapers to sell, there on the front page of the *Ft. Sackville Sentinel* was an article in which its bold print headline read: *AIDS HITS FT. SACKVILLE*. The picture that accompanied the article was a shadowed profile of a man sitting on the side of his

clinic bed near a window. Although the person interviewed in the article chose to remain anonymous, I recognized Eric's profile. Eric had AIDS.

Eric had moved to The Damien Center in Indianapolis, a coordinated care facility supported by a local Episcopal and Catholic church, in order to receive treatment and battle the disease. He left his family, friends, and business in order to fight for his life. If I could recognize his profile in the paper, I knew the rest of the community could too. And they did.

We kept a stack of *Sentinel* daily editions on the restaurant's cashier's counter for purchase. That day, while I relieved the cashier during her lunch break, after the noon rush, one customer approached to pay for his meal, looked at the front page then said to me, "The faggot got what he deserved." Another, a woman this time, said to her dining companion as she pointed to Eric's picture with her manicured nail for emphasis, "It's God's punishment." After their words, my instinct concerning the community was reaffirmed. I knew it would be wise for Kirk and me to keep our distance from Kevin. Otherwise, customers might turn their attention to us, to me – gay by association. In their minds and mouths word would undoubtedly go from 'did you hear C.J. Daniels son is gay' to 'Grey Daniels–AIDS patient.' Furthermore, it meant Kirk would have to somehow remain my 'out of town pleasure.'

It was after Greg Louganis appeared on Oprah to speak of his recent HIV diagnosis and his new book *Breaking the Surface* that I began to think seriously about my

own HIV status. Ft. Sackville had a community college, but no bookstore. Well, except for the Christian Bible Book Store on Main Street. On my next trip to Evansville I stopped at a Barnes and Noble near the mall to buy Greg Louganis' book, as well as the sports store next door to buy rollerblades –I imagined myself developing muscular legs like Kirk's and thought I could do so by rollerblading.

Like Eric's front-page picture in the Ft. Sackville Sentinel, *Breaking the Surface* was a wake-up call. I'd watched Greg diving and found him and his polished smile quite handsome. How could he be HIV positive? It never occurred to me that he might be gay. I recalled watching him hit his head on the diving board. The blood. But more importantly, his story, not Eric's, convinced me that I needed to be tested. But how? Kirk and I were fucking like jackrabbits, sometimes without protection. Where would I get an HIV test? HIV and AIDS was a big city issue. Somehow Eric had brought it back to our hometown. Was it possible I could've done the same.

The morning I finished reading Greg's book was my day off. It was a beautiful and warm early spring day. I decided to go rollerblading, to head downtown and have lunch, then rollerblade back. Nearing Main Street, as I passed Doc Vonderbreck's office, my instinct told me I could talk to him. Doc was my general practitioner; he had been since I could remember. He didn't worry with what people thought. He didn't play Ft. Sackville's game. He did his own thing and to hell with everyone else. He liked young, good-looking nurses and his office was full of them. He never apologized. I'm certain if given the opportunity and ability to go back to that Mercy Memorial Hospital hallway as a young resident doctor when Grandpa Collin threatened him, having grown wiser and

gutsier over the years, he'd tell Grandpa Collin to go fuck himself. Doc made his own world and was successful. Nobody was taking him down.

His office was housed in a one-story, ornate Victorian. Lengthwise its span encompassed half a city block. A millennium before perhaps, it had been nicknamed the Wedding Cake because of its intricate gingerbread architecture. On the sidewalk in front of its black wrought-iron fence, I hesitated, then found myself entering the yard through the gate. A moment later I was navigating the steep front porch steps between two flowering pear trees and rolling myself through the front door.

The foyer served as a reception area with its right parlor a patient waiting room and its left parlor storage for patient files. A long hall with a wood floor and a 12-foot ceiling dissected the shotgun house. Doors on each side served as portals to examination rooms. The receptionist asked if I had an appointment, I said no. "I just need to speak with Doc for a moment." He appeared at the far end of the hall in his blue jeans and cowboy boots. Tufts of his curly gray hair unraveled from under his cowboy hat. "Grey, what-in-the-hell are you doing?" he asked.

"I came to see you."

"C'mon back." The nurse smiled and motioned for me to go. I rollerbladed down the hall and followed Doc into an empty examination room.

"Well that's the first time I've had a patient roll-in toes down. They're usually rolling-out toes up," he said.

"Because *you* 've killed them," I said.

"You can't win them all," Doc said. "What can I do for you?"

“I have a favor to ask. I don’t know how to ask it so I’m just going to say it. How can I get an HIV test?”

“We can do one here.”

“Thing is I don’t want anyone to know.”

Doc understood what I meant.

“I mean, my health insurance. I don’t want anything on record.”

“How about we just take some blood and figure it out?” he said.

“Can I pay you in cash?” I asked.

“We’ll do one better. You can buy commercial containers of extra virgin olive oil, right?”

“Like vegetable oil the restaurant uses? It comes in five gallon jugs.”

“Yes. But extra virgin olive oil. I use it on my horse saddles.” Doc lived on his horse farm a few miles south of town.

“Sure. I can buy it through Sysco or Krueger’s.”

“I tell you what. Order twenty-five gallons, that’s five, right? Order five containers and bring them to the office. That’ll be your payment.”

That familiar anxious feeling began creeping into the pit of my stomach. I was nervous and Doc saw I was trying to hide my shaking hands.

“Grey, are you sure your OK? Are you scared you might be positive?”

“I don’t know if I’m OK. This is going to sound crazy but I’m not as scared of being positive as I am of people finding out if I am positive. I don’t know what will happen. Does that make sense?”

“Grey, these folk around here are idiots. OK. They always will be. Nothing is going to change that. You need to make yourself happy. Fuck everybody else.”

“But if I’m positive and people find out I don’t know what will happen to the restaurant. You saw what this town did to Robbie Palmer’s family. And everybody knows it was Eric’s picture on the front page of the paper.”

Doc leaned against the examination table upon which I was sitting and crossed his legs, one shin resting on the other. His boots looked like anvils weighing him down. He leaned in and faced me eye to eye. “Grey, there’s a whole lot you don’t know about Robbie Palmer’s murder. I was coroner. I testified in front of the grand jury. Robbie’s family was poor, from the wrong side of the tracks according to some. He nor his mother stood a chance. Your family is not like his. I’m not saying it’s right, I’m just saying people will treat you differently because of who your family is. Because of the restaurant. Those Christians aren’t going to give up their fried chicken. You’re going to be OK.

My anxiousness began to dissipate.

“Do you test the blood here?” I asked.

“No. We send it to Mercy. But don’t worry. I’ll send it under my ex-wife’s name.”

I couldn’t help but smile thinking about the divorce battle between Doc and his ex-wife and the young nurse that started it all. How the gossip had reached a legendary level in the community. Doc was giving *me* advice on how to handle Ft. Sackville when a report of his divorce court proceedings was featured on the local evening news broadcast from Terre Haute. In it details emerged that his wife had left him not only because of his philandering, but because after she confronted him about it he shot three of her pet

pygmy goats. Not to mention matters being made worse after Doc purchased a billboard a few blocks from the restaurant on Fairground Avenue to advertise his offer of \$10,000 dollars to any local citizen willing to run against his ex-wife's new husband -- a popular long-serving judge -- in his bid for reelection.

“That’s perfect. Thank you,” I said.

I liked Doc. And I felt I could trust him with my situation. But I knew if I were HIV positive and people found out, the restaurant was fucked. Customers of Daniels’ Family Buffet would never eat in a restaurant with food and knives and an owner’s son with AIDS.

I was fortunate, two weeks later my test came back negative.

From the pulpit Daryl closed his Bible and asked the parishioners to bow their head in prayer. As he prayed aloud on behalf of the Wabash Valley Church Christians sitting there on Christmas Sunday, I said a silent prayer for Kirk, for Eric, and for me. I thanked God for keeping me safe. I also said a prayer for Doc Vonderbreck. I figured he needed one as much as the rest of us.

“Amen,” Pastor Daryl said.

“Amen,” parroted the parishioners.

Chapter Fifteen

- Myrna Boil -

Myrna Boil was tart. Perhaps she had eaten one too many of her own homemade lemon pies. She herself, I was convinced, had become lemon curd, absent the sugar. Eye-squinting. Mouth puckering. Even her hair looked beat, whipped like egg whites into a silver-blue meringue. Its glossy peaks perched impeccably upon her head. Her makeup, polyester trousers, everything about her appearance was fifties-housewife flawless. A place for everything - everything in its place. And somehow her doughy legs, despite their lumbering gate, managed to carry her religiously to Daniels' Family Buffet. They had for decades. Hers was a regular face. She wasn't just the organist at Wabash Valley Baptist Church, she was its self-appointed matriarch. To me, growing up in the restaurant, it seemed she'd always been old, an immortal. One of Satan's Seniors. There were others of her ilk. They too had silver-blue hair. Her allies always bearing baked goods. I was certain *she* was their ringleader.

Her occupation was battered women. She ran a secret shelter, a grand home on the corner of 4th Street and Seminary. This safe-haven was the old Ormiston homeplace—a Greek revival showcasing mammoth pillars, curved porches, a third story gabled ballroom. The mansion was a regular attraction for the American Revolution Railway, a local history tour. Every muggy mosquito summer, visitors -handfuls of them- sat gawking from within an open-air city bus retrofitted to look like a 19th century steam locomotive, complete with cow catcher. Summer was, after all, the height of tourist

season according to the dusty brochures at the Ft. Sackville Chamber of Commerce. The “train” would chug through the city streets, spewing black exhaust in its wake, highlighting points of interest: where revolutionaries may have slept, the innumerable antique stores on Main Street –their contents more pyre than profit, an old French house with a costumed fur trader, along with former Victorian or Antebellum-inspired mansions now converted into apartments, owed by slumlords that rented to local community college students. Depending on luck, any one group of out-of-towners might witness bedlam at the secret battered women’s shelter –a carnival of drunken husbands, river rats attempting to collect their wives; their southern Indiana epithets drowning out the recorded drone of the tour guide. Oh, the spectacle on Myrna’s manicured front lawn: what those history buffs witnessed during their visits to Old Ft. Sackville!

Daniels Family Buffet was all-you-can-eat, one price, \$5.99, included everything. Customers paid before they entered the dining room. The restaurant policy was “take all you want but eat all you take.” Carryout was considered an extra meal, therefore an additional charge. At least once a week, inevitably, one of our waitresses would whisper to me, “Myrna’s got fried chicken in her purse.”

“Fuck. Really? Again?”

Ziploc bags or aluminum foil were her modus operandi. She knew she was breaking the rules. We knew she was breaking the rules. She knew we knew she was breaking the rules. Each instance ended with a confrontation at her table. I would deliver to her a guest check with carry-out container and say, “Myrna, you know we offer boxes for carry-out, no need to bring your own bags or foil from home. Just put the food here so

as not to ruin your purse.” She would insist she didn’t know what I was talking about. It always became a David versus Goliath battle.

Eventually she would cave, pay the additional meal charge then declare loud enough for other patrons to hear, “The Daniels are money hungry. I’ll never eat here again!”

One could always see Myrna coming, no matter: she bullied her way down the buffet; crept along Highway 41 behind the wheel of her enormous blue Cadillac, backing up traffic; or powered her way through the aisles of Walmart in one of their motorized shopping carts –my friend Garland Reitz called them girth-movers. One week I happened to be at Walmart on my day off stocking up on essentials when she spotted me just as I spotted her. I became her target. I had nowhere to hide as she came rolling toward me in her girth-mover with a loaded basket.

She ran over my foot.

“Grey! I must have a word with you about your Swiss Steak. It’s baked to death. Cremated!”

It was because of customers like Myrna that I rarely went out in public.

“Myrna, it’s not. Last Sunday alone we served 12 full steamtable pans. Each one four inches deep loaded with steak. Do you realize how much Swiss Steak that is? If it’d been cremated there would have been other complaints. You’re the only unhappy customer.”

“I disagree. I’m certain there were other complaints. You’re just not telling me the truth.”

“Yes Myrna, you’re absolutely right. I’m lying to you. Now if you don’t mind I’d like to finish my shopping.”

This was not a new game for Myrna. She was a pro. I was blocked, squeezed against the Charmin by her cart.

“You know there are others.”

“Other what?”

“Other restaurants! I can take my money elsewhere.”

“Perhaps then you should.”

“You’re problem young man is you don’t go to church and when you do you must not pay attention. The Bible says you are supposed to respect your elders. Perhaps you need to read your Bible again. I suspect you need to reread your Bible for other things as well.”

I did my best frozen face, my Midwestern stare. The same look my parents had mastered so well. Now I understood that like my parents, I, too, had perfected the stoic look as a coping mechanism for people like Myrna.

Sensing my disinterest in her complaint, with an audible *harrumph*, she fired up her cart, backed up beeping, then took off at a snail’s pace toward the bakery, her hair splitting the airspace above her –like that cow catcher on the Revolution Railway.

I abandoned my shopping, left Walmart, my foot throbbing, with memories flooding my brain of why I didn’t shop there or show my face in the community outside of the restaurant.

I knew Myrna would be back in the restaurant next Sunday. Foil stashed and ready to steal more fried chicken.

Chapter Sixteen

- Easter Sunday -

My next visit to Wabash Valley Church was with my family on Easter Sunday. The winter had passed uneventful. Folks stayed inside for the most part except to grocery shop, go to church, and eat at Daniel's Family Buffet. Trace remained quiet and I gave him space. I made sure that when I talked about my life in Miami Beach I painted a positive picture –one of acceptance and freedom. I had wanted to hear him sing again and he had been talking about his excitement of being given a solo by Pastor Daryl on Easter Sunday, a song Trace had picked out himself, an old southern Baptist hymn and his favorite: *Just as I Am*. I sensed, hoped perhaps, that Trace was setting the stage for his coming out. I wanted to be in the sanctuary to support him, if only via eye contact.

Sitting next to Mom in the pew at Wabash Valley Baptist Church, I notice Daryl's dad sitting across the aisle in front of us. "His father sure is pleased," I said, pointing toward an aging Mr. Stone, smiling. His posture erect and his chest puffed up with pride.

"I sort of feel sorry for Walt since his wife left him. It seems Daryl returning to Ft. Sackville has been his dad's saving grace," Mom said.

Daryl retrieved his Bible from the podium; its pages tagged with colorful Post-It notes.

"Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John Chapter Eleven, Verse Twenty-Five and Twenty-Six. Praise Jesus!"

Celebratory shouts affirmations from the sanctuary.

“John Chapter Eight, Verse Twelve says, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness but will have the Light of life.”

Daryl paused for effect as his eyes traveled among the parishioners. “Are you in darkness? Have you seen the light? Do you know Jesus?”

With his Bible he motioned toward the youth choir then returned his focus to the parishioners, “Look at our choir. Look at the light in their faces. I see our savior Jesus Christ in each of them. His light shines through.”

Trace sat smiling, proud of his performance, the acknowledgement. All eyes, including Daryl’s, were on him.

“John Chapter One, Verse Ten, says: He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”

Daryl paused.

“Are you in darkness? Have you seen the light? Do you know Jesus?”

Building momentum, Daryl walked toward the baptismal side of the stage carrying his open Bible. “Look at our world. Technology. The Internet. Listen to the music. Look at the TV. Just the other night my sons wanted to watch that show, *Will and Grace!*”

Again he paused.

“Galatians Five tells us: Now the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality. Things like this I warn you, as I warned you before, those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Praise Jesus!”

“Praise Jesus,” parroted the parishioners.

Daryl walked to the right side of the stage then stood just above Mrs. Myrna Boil who sat attentively at her organ. For emphasis he beat his Bible against the air above him, “Homosexuals on television. For *my* sons to see. For *your* sons to see. An abomination celebrated. What has man created? Is the light of Jesus reflected in this? Does *our* world no yet know Him?”

He paused.

“*John Chapter One, Verse Eleven: He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.*”

Daryl pointed his Bible toward the parishioners, toward my family and me, and continued, “Are you in darkness? Have you seen the light? Do you know Jesus?”

Returning center stage Daryl placed his Bible upon the podium, everyone’s attention harnessed. The ebb and flow of his evangelical voice drew parishioners as water draws those who thirst.

“Like many of you, I know someone that’s made the lifestyle choice to be a homosexual. This person has disobeyed God’s Word. Today, standing here in this sacred house, as we gather to celebrate our Savior’s resurrection, to celebrate Him, He that shed his blood for us, to this person I say: *You are in darkness! See the light! Know Jesus!*”

My face hardened.

Mom placed her left hand upon my knee. Her large diamond wedding ring shimmered in the cupola’s dusty sunlight.

Daryl continued, “Today I give you good news of great joy, the true light, which enlightens *everyone*, shed His blood for us. He saved us from our sins. Praise Jesus! Christ is risen!”

Once more parishioners rose in rousing ovation to Daryl's declaration. Mom, Dad, Cameron and I sat there for a moment, hesitant, unsure whether or not to follow those in the pews around us. Concerned, we rose slowly, staring at one another; separately, in wonderment we surveyed the sanctuary.

Daryl stood at the pulpit, proud, accepting the crowd's enormous adulation. His smile wide, teeth white. His posture erect, not unlike his father's as he triumphantly raised his Bible in the air. The youth choir stood behind him fervently applauding. Reverend Damien danced a jig in front of his chair. Trace stood like me, his face expressionless, body motionless. Only his eyes moved left to right, looking around. Daryl's sermon frightened him and cemented my suspicions. Daryl had whipped the church into a frenzy of fear in exactly the same way Pastor Damian had after Robbie Palmer's murder and during the height of the 1980's AIDS panic.

After minutes of applause, admiring parishioners began to file from the pews and down the aisle –some toward the exit, others toward the pulpit. Trace and the choir left the stage as they had entered.

Making our way through throngs of Easter Sunday well-wishers, my family and I headed to the parking lot. I broke through the crowd early, my attention focused entirely on getting to the car. Mom and Cameron kept up with me. Dad lagged behind, wrestling his portable oxygen tank. Arriving at the car, I positioned myself beside the driver's door, resting my arms on the car's roof, the key remote in my hand. We waited on Dad, Cameron on my side, Mom standing opposite Cam and me beside the rear passenger door.

“What the hell was that about?” I asked.

“It wasn't about you,” Mom replied.

“Bullshit! It was exactly about me. The whole sermon was directed toward me. The only reason I came to this house of horrors was to support Trace.”

“I’m sorry. I just thought we could have a nice Easter Sunday as a family.”

“Well, it sure as hell wasn’t a Judy Garland movie in there.”

“Those people were totally kissing his ass,” Cameron said.

“What? Who? Trace or Daryl?” I asked.

“Both. He was getting ego-fucked by everyone in there. It was epic,” Cameron said.

When Dad arrived I clicked the remote. The car beeped, its lights flashed twice. Dad opened the front passenger door. Mom, Cameron and I opened ours.

“Cameron! Enough. Grey, you too,” Mom said. “Let’s just get in the car. We need to get to the restaurant. We’ll forget we even came,”

“Forget? It was a public lynching! That place is loaded with people...”

Dad interrupted me.

“Get in the goddamn car! I’m ready to go home,” he said, wrestling his portable oxygen tank into the front floorboard. “Grey, go to the Quickstop on the way to the restaurant. I’m buying cigarettes.”

“Collin, you are not smoking,” Mom said.

“They hell I’m not. Happy Easter Sunday to me!”

“Praise Jesus!” Cameron muttered.

Everyone except Mom got in the car. Three doors slammed in succession. Sitting behind the wheel, I looked over my shoulder to see if she was in. Her expression revealed exhaustion. For the first time in my life her face looked old.

“Are you coming?” I asked.

Quietly she slipped herself into the backseat and closed the door.

Trace did not show up for his shift at Daniels Family Buffet. He didn't show up for his shift the next day or the day after that. No one called. No one answered the phone at his house. No one answered the door. Trace had disappeared without a word from anyone. He had graduated midterm from Harrison High and was working the spring semester of his senior year at the restaurant to save money for fall semester at Ft. Sackville Community College. Since he wasn't in school his friends had no idea what had happened. I feared the worst. It was five days after Easter Sunday, when his father called and left a message with our cashier telling us Trace would not be returning to work. His parents had sent him away. It was obvious Trace had come out to them.

Chapter Seventeen

- Letter One -

I received my first letter from Trace two weeks after Easter Sunday.

Dear Grey,

Please don't let anyone see or read this letter! I'm not supposed to have contact with the secular world. I could get into a lot of trouble. One of my "brothers in Christ" here helped me mail this by sneaking it into a neighbor's mailbox. I'll explain it all to you later. I don't know what to do?

I'm sure you've heard by now that Pastor Daryl found a place to help me become straight. My mother and father brought me here a week ago. It's called 'Victory House on Dogwood Hill' and it's in Fergus Falls, MN. It's run by one of Pastor Daryl's Liberty University classmates. I'm sitting at a desk in my room looking out the window at some river named Otter Tail. I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe they did this to me. That Pastor Daryl did this to me.

I stopped reading the letter and sat in silence at my desk, eyes closed, my face resting in the palm of my hand. What had they done to Trace? Victory House? Dogwood Hill? What the hell was Dogwood Hill? In my mind I imagined Dogwood trees atop Mt. Golgotha, the hill upon which Christ was crucified, which then reminded me of my Grandma Dixie and her Dogwood tree in the backyard.

As a child, after Sunday school and church service at Wabash Valley Baptist, my mother and I would go to the Diner to eat Sunday dinner with Dad. One Sunday the school lesson was

about the Dogwood tree. My class had been given a Mimeograph copy of the tree to color while we listened to the teacher, Mrs. Eisenhut, Marci's mom, teach the day's lesson. The paper tree captivated me; it looked like the one in Grandma's backyard. The one in which I would climb as high as I could then sit in its top branches, reclining and balancing myself on a limb in order to watch its leaves glow a golden green in the summer sunlight above me. The tree was very old. It was as if I could feel its age in the wood. I wanted to color my paper tree to look just like hers, its flowers in the spring: heart shaped white blossoms with faint pinkish-red marks at their tips and a green bud center. I was so intent on getting the color just right, struggling to use just enough of the pink and red crayon, that I totally missed the lesson. When we arrived at the restaurant, since Dad was already busy with customers, Mom and I sat with Grandma Dixie at the front table while she manned the cash register. I showed her my Dogwood tree.

“Grey, this is lovely. It looks just like the one at my house. Did you do the coloring?”

“Yes.”

“Well aren't you the artist. Why you're going to be the next Mo-net.” To this day I giggle when I think of her saying Mo-net, like fishing net. She was also fond of red wine. “I can't wait to go home and put up my feet with a glass of Caber-net,” she'd often say. Ours was a diner family. Not a family that dined.

“Who's Mo-net?” I asked.

“Never mind,” she said. “Just a famous painter I saw in a book once. So tell me the story of your tree. What did Mrs. Eisenhut tell you about the Dogwood?”

“I don't remember.”

“Well,” Grandma said, “the Dogwood is a very important tree. It's the one they used to make the cross that Jesus was crucified on. See the blossoms here? Each spring they remind us of

His love; that He shed his blood for us. See how you put the red marks on the tips of the white petals? On the real tree, just like you've done here, those are symbolic of his being nailed to the cross." She pointed to the green center. "This is His crown of thorns. After they crucified Jesus, God said the Dogwood tree would never grow large again. That's why they're so small. Small enough for you to climb."

"Does God hate the Dogwood tree?" I asked. I loved Grandma Dixie's tree. I couldn't imagine anyone hating a tree, especially one with such pretty springtime flowers and leaves that glowed.

"No. Of course not. God doesn't hate anything. He made all of it. Everything belongs to him. He loves it all. He loves us all. God just wanted, I suppose, to give us a reminder of what His son did. That He wiped away our sins. That we always have the chance to be reborn. Just like the rainbow reminds us that God will never flood the earth again. God will never hurt us."

Pastor Daryl, along with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and Victory House, were trying to wipe away Trace's sin.

After you and I talked I waited about a week or so and then decided to talk to Mother and Father. Then Pastor Daryl gave his sermon on Easter Sunday and I felt like he was calling me out in front of the entire church. That night it was just Mother, Father and I -we were having leftovers from my aunt and uncle's Easter dinner- and without thinking (Grey, I was so scared) I said, "Will you pass the mashed potatoes? Oh, by the way, I'm gay." You could of heard a pin drop. My father just sat there holding the bowl of potatoes mid air, his face frozen. And then something did drop, my mother's fork and knife on her plate, the clanking sound startled all of us, she looked so shocked and fearful at the same time. I tried to explain to them that I'd always felt this way but they wouldn't listen. I tried to tell them about you and your experience but they said you were just trying to recruit me into your lifestyle. Now I'm here. I don't know what to do.

I stopped reading. Had I sealed Trace's fate by telling him to be honest with his parents, that they would love him unconditionally? What had I done?

They called Pastor Daryl and he came right over. He said he had been expecting me to pull something like this. He said he figured that I'd been talking to you. He reminded me of God's word, that homosexuality is an abomination in God's eyes. Then we prayed. He told Mother and Father that he knew exactly how to fix my problem and he called Mike, the guy that runs this clinic. Pastor Daryl helped my parents pack my things and we left the next morning before sunrise and arrived here way after 8:00pm that night. On the drive up Pastor Daryl talked the whole time about how he had worked with places like Victory Hill in Lynchburg, Virginia at the University there as part of Liberty's internship outreach program. And how they'd been successful in bringing those poor unfortunate souls suffering from my same sickness to the light. That God's love had transformed their suffering into joy. They had been saved through Jesus and born anew in Him. Pastor Daryl said there is a reason they call it "pray the gay away." He went on and on and on for the entire 15-hour drive.

Pray the gay way? Did Daryl really believe that praying could change Trace's sexual orientation, *my* orientation? I knew Daryl was steadfast in his faith. But still, it was hard to erase the high school memory of my dick in his mouth. He was a smart guy. A 4.0 all through high school. I envied his intelligence then. How could he have abandoned biology? Logic? Had Robbie's murder fucked him up that much? I did understand his veiled attack against me in church Easter Sunday; we had a history he obviously wanted to forget. I knew Daryl too well. He wasn't attacking Trace that day; he was sending a clear message to me. But what had Trace done, other than trust him?

This place is a three-story brick house that had once been painted white but seems to have washed out and faded over the years. The red color of the brick is seeping through. The front porch is white, wooden and wide, very ornate with ferns and white wicker furniture and ceiling fans. There are gas-lamps on each

side of the front door. It looks like something a grandmother would live in. A long straight, narrow sidewalk leads to the front steps of the house.

I wondered if Victory House was a modern day, brick and mortar version of a psychiatric unit using shock therapy or lobotomizing patients –both procedures once used to “cure” homosexuality. Was Victory House operating under the same misguided principles and trying to “fix” Trace? What license or medical training was behind his treatment? Or was Victory House merely operating by Biblical principles and interpretation?

Mike, the director of the program, met us on the front porch. When I walked up the steps behind Pastor Daryl he introduced my parents and then me. Mike shook my hand and then offered to take my backpack. There were two men waiting in the foyer that stepped out and took my two pieces of luggage. I was only allowed to bring two bags plus my backpack with some personal belongings or mementoes that were important to me. Pastor Daryl said they encourage the brothers in Christ –that’s what I am now- to bring pieces of home with them. It’s to make me feel more comfortable, he said.

I wondered what Trace had chosen to take with him.

Mike took us into the front parlor and we sat down. Another guy came in and offered up some iced tea. Mike said he tried to bring a bit of the south to Minnesota –that Victory House always has iced tea on hand. After the drinks arrived Mike asked me to recount my story for him. My parents just sat there with no expression. A couple of times my mother hung her head and it looked like she was trying to hide tears. Mike said my story was not unusual. He said men like you lead many young men like me astray –guys trying to take advantage of youth and purity. That people like you see a light in boys like me and are drawn to it, but in perversion. That you want it and mistake the light for sex. What guys like you are really seeing in guys like me is Christ’s love shining through and His attraction. But the light is meant to call one to Christ. It’s not meant for self-gratification and defilement of the body temple.

We sat in the parlor for about an hour and then the two guys that took my luggage came back and took me to my room. I said goodbye to Mother and Father and Pastor Daryl. Mike said he needed to talk to them in private but that I'd get to see them at breakfast in the morning before they left. He kept my backpack.

When I got to the room my things were not there. There was a pair of pajamas, bottoms and a top like I used to wear in grade school, folded neatly on my bed. There was also a towel and a washcloth. The guys said my things would be delivered to my room tomorrow and that for the time being I could use the towels and sleep in the pajamas they'd provided. When they left I walked over to lock the bedroom door but there was no lock on it. I decided to just go to bed. I slept in my clothes. I did get up during the night to go pee and found a guy stationed in the hall near the bathroom door. He smiled but said nothing. It was like he was a guard or something. I found out later there are nightshift guards posted on the second and third floor hall. They monitor bedroom and bathroom activity at night. Some of the guys here call them the 'Penis Police.' I quickly figured out why there are no locks on the bedroom doors. They're allowed to do random room checks any time day or night. I can, thank goodness, at least lock the bathroom door.

The next morning I went down to the breakfast room and saw there were half dozen or so other men of all ages sitting and eating. These were my "brothers." And when I entered, Mother, Father, Pastor Daryl and Mike were at a table together and motioned for me to join them. Mike asked how I'd slept? I told him OK. Mother asked if I'd slept in my clothes, that it looked like I had. I told her yes. For the most part breakfast was quiet. Pastor Daryl said Grace, we ate, and afterwards Father said that he and Mother needed to get on the road if they wanted to make it home at a decent hour. Father said they had a nice meeting with Mike last night and for me not to be worried, I was in good hands. Most importantly I was in God's hands and that He was working through Mike and the good people at Victory Hill. We said goodbye and I watched them pull out of the drive. Father waved. Mother wouldn't look at me. I could tell she was crying. Pastor Daryl was smiling.

I have so much more I want to tell you but I need to go. I have a pretty tight schedule here with Bible study, behavior modification class, group therapy, private therapy, chores, and development of my discipline and my restoration plan. Please don't tell anyone I sent you this letter. I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to. I get my first evaluation on the 40th day. The whole thing is supposed to take 6 months. I hope to be home before next spring.

Sincerely,

Trace

I sat there, motionless, trying not to vomit, the sour acid rising in my throat. *What had I done?*

I spun around in my chair and threw up in the paper shredder receptacle next to my desk. The pungent smell of my bile gagged me and I threw up again.

What had I done?

What had Daryl done? Daryl went to Liberty University to escape his own demons but how could he do this to Trace? After all, it had been Daryl tapping on my basement window that Saturday night in May during his Senior Week of high school, two weeks before he graduated from Harrison High.

Chapter Eighteen

- May 1986 -

At 2:00am Daryl appeared at my basement bedroom window, tapping on the glass pane. After returning from Captiva Island I'd moved my bedroom from the second floor of my parents' house to our half-finished basement, in order to gain some independence, creating the Midwestern equivalent of a one-room apartment. The windows along the foundation were large enough to open, thus enabling my friends and me to enter and exit without my parents' knowledge. On several late night occasions the window served as a portal for the pizza delivery guy. One Friday night, late, Daryl came knocking at the window. Daryl knew I was home, which, on a Friday night, was unusual. He'd been on a date with Shanni. I was asleep. I got out of bed, walked to the window and opened it. I felt the cool spring air on my bare chest.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I figured you'd be up. What are *you* doing?”

I could smell whiskey on his breath.

“I was sleeping. I didn't feel like going out tonight. Where is Shanni?”

Daryl climbed down through the window. I shut it behind him.

“She's at home. We went out for a little bit, hit a couple of parties – they were lame. Then we went back to her place to watch a movie. Her parents are gone. We drank almost a fifth of Jack Daniels.”

“No shit. I can smell it.”

“She can be such a bitch.”

I turned on the lamp next to the sofa. We sat down.

“What happened now?”

Daryl and Shanni had been dating for less than two years and were notorious for passionate romance and equally passionate quarrels. Shanni was in my junior class; she and Daryl were ‘the couple’ in our group of five. Daryl was the only senior. This particular May weekend ushered in the beginning of Senior Week, celebrated by a host of underage, impromptu parties around the county, mostly ‘keggers’ in corn fields outside city limits, beyond the watchful eyes of the Ft. Sackville Police. It was a tradition that Harrison High seniors were let out of school a week before the underclassmen. For them summer vacation began this weekend. Their Class of ‘86 graduation would follow in two weeks.

“She’s all pissed off because I don’t want to stay in town and go to Ft. Sackville Community College for one year until she graduates. She has this idea that we’re going to go to Indiana University together. I keep telling her I’m going wherever the athletic scholarships are; I just have to decide which one I want. She got all bitchy and told me to get out.”

“So you came here?”

“Yeah. I figured I could crash here then go home in the morning. I didn’t want to drive through town with all the cops out.”

“Sure. No problem. Dad said they’d be out in full force this weekend.”

“You got anything to drink?”

“No. All the liquor is in the kitchen cabinet upstairs. Mom and Dad are asleep. Cam’s been having trouble sleeping through the night. He may hear us; I wouldn’t want to wake him. Probably shouldn’t chance it.”

“Dude, I still can’t believe you have a little brother. Your parents are having more sex than you.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s true. When’s the last time you got laid?”

“I don’t know. A while ago I guess.”

“Was it Marci? Did you guys do it in the backseat of one of her daddy’s Oldsmobiles?”

Marci Eisnehut’s father owned the Chevrolet and Oldsmobile dealership in town.

“Maybe,” I said.

“You haven’t gotten any since, have you?”

“No! I’ve not. OK. That was it. First time-last time.”

“Did she go down on you?”

“You’re drunk. You need to go to bed.”

“All right. All right. Don’t you get all pissy too. I’m just messing with ya.” He playfully punched me in the shoulder. I got up from the sofa, switched off the lamp, and went back to bed.

“What? You’re just going to leave me here?”

“Go to sleep, Daryl.”

Moments later I heard his belt buckle clink as it hit the basement's tile floor. Then I felt him crawl into bed opposite me.

"I'm not sleeping on that sofa," he said. "It sucks."

"Whatever. Just go to sleep."

A few minutes following there was silence. I could tell Daryl was asleep by his deep breathing; he had passed out. I fell asleep too.

Just before sunrise I awoke to find Daryl spooning me, his torso pressed against my back, his right arm under mine with his hand inside my cut-off sweats stroking my semi-erect dick. He'd taken off his underwear during the night, possibly after his belt hit the floor before he got into bed. At first, silently, I panicked then decided to go with it, my heart racing. I reached behind me and felt he was hard too. He inched himself under the covers and pulled my shorts to my ankles. I kicked them off. Soon I felt his warm mouth, his lips press against the base of my hard-on. I didn't last long. Just as silently he resurfaced behind me. I followed his lead and reciprocated the act. I kept my eyes closed. I remembered Captiva, his body in the shower. My hands felt the warmth of his thighs, their tight sinewy muscles contracting as I pressed against them with the palms of my hands. I heard Daryl moan. He didn't last long either.

Our encounter was odd; it played-out in a fog of half-awake-half-asleep. Or, at least it was orchestrated to appear as such. Regardless, that morning was electrifying for me, far better than what I'd experienced with Marci in the backseat of one of her old

man's Oldsmobiles. The encounter with her wasn't natural; I felt misplaced, awkward, in the wrong body. With Daryl it felt right. My instinct guided me.

Having fallen back asleep, Daryl and I did not wake until almost noon. I felt him get out of bed, then heard him grab his clothes and dress.

"Grey," he whispered from across the room, "you want to shut the window behind me?"

"Just go upstairs, out the backdoor. Mom probably took Cam to the restaurant to eat lunch with Dad."

"Naw. I'll just go out the window."

"Hold on a second." I had to find my shorts under the covers near my feet and as I got out of bed Daryl turned his back to me as I put them on.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"No plans. I don't have to work this weekend."

I walked over to him near the window.

"I call you later tonight. Lets hang out," he said.

"OK."

Daryl opened the window and climbed out. I shut and locked it behind him. I smiled. It wasn't full-on sex but close enough. *Neither of us said anything?* I wondered what he was thinking as I watched him walk down the drive, a bit disheveled, toward his

car; he was driving his brother's Trans Am. *Would he just ignore what happened?*

Should I?

Later that evening I called his house but Mrs. Stone said he wasn't home; he was on a date with Shanni. I stayed home that Saturday night and went to bed early. Maybe there'd be another 2:00am knock at my bedroom window. There never was. Two weeks later Robbie Palmer's murdered body was discovered dumped and decomposing in a farm field drainage ditch alongside Highway 41 south. I knew then Daryl and I would never be together. We couldn't. Although he said his golf scholarship necessitated his leaving for Liberty University just after graduation I was certain our secret encounter followed by Robbie's murder was the real reason. He was just as frightened as me.

Chapter Nineteen

- Letter Two -

It was late June when I got the next letter from Trace. The summer had begun heating up along with the gossip surrounding Trace's absence and my involvement in it. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were still eating in the restaurant but refused to acknowledge me. Pastor Daryl and his wife still ate with us too. He was all smiles, said hello, and acted as if nothing were going on. I knew that smile. It was the same smile that showed up at my bedroom window in high school, although I no longer found it sexy.

My father's illness was advancing. Mom and I tried to keep the town chatter at bay. We held an employee meeting to instruct everyone and address the gossip, which was reaching a fever pitch. Our employees were aware. We told them that in order to maintain business as usual we *all* needed to avoid involvement; we *all* recognized the restaurant as our life-blood and we couldn't do or say anything to jeopardize it—we could not piss off the Sunday Christians. Grandpa Collin always said Monday through Saturday paid the bills and Sunday was profit. Without fail Sundays were our busiest day of the week. Mom and I worried. We had 70 employees, two thirds of whom were full time. Many had worked for our family for 20 plus years. We had payroll, bills, taxes, a mortgage, utilities, peoples' livelihoods to consider and protect. We had listened to the vitriolic gossipmongers and local pulpits after Robbie Palmer's murder back in the 80's. We witnessed their power. We could not allow the business to be affected by this current scandal.

I wrestled with guilt. By reaching out to Trace that Friday night after closing, without

realizing, I had set in motion his potential destruction, and the destruction of my family's business. My Dad was aware something was taking place. He was still recovering at home. Although sales were down we chalked it up to the recent spike in gasoline, caused by our nation at war. Everything had increased including food costs. But I knew it was more than the national economy. I had returned an openly gay man, thinking I could have the life in Ft. Sackville that I'd lived in Miami Beach. That it was about what was inside of me. I'd told myself I had the ability to make my own happiness. It was all about perspective, how I chose to see my life. I believed an authentic life could be led. After all it wasn't as if I were marching down Main Street in a gold lame speedo with a gay pride flag screaming, "I'm queer, I'm here, get used to it!" I was being respectful of others and of the restaurant. Most especially the restaurant. There was a history greater than my happiness to consider. Dad accepted the explanation regarding the slipping sales. "That fucking George "Dub-ya" Bush killed the economy. Not even Obama can fix his mess," he'd say. But I sensed that Mom felt as I did. That something local was at work and Pastor Daryl's smile was behind it. That summer she and I watched the restaurant's customer count like a stockbroker watches NASDAQ. When I opened Trace's second letter, all of this was swirling about in my mind like the muddy whirlpools in the Wabash River:

Dear Grey,

Hello. I hope this letter manages to get to you. The way things are now I have no idea if you even got my first letter. I hope you did. If you are getting my letters please do not share them with anyone. Don't let anybody see them or know I'm writing you. I could get into so much trouble if they ever find out I was mailing letters.

I don't know where to begin. I kind of lose track of the days but I know it's been at least a month, maybe 6 or 7 weeks since I sent you my first letter. I finally got my things. After I arrived I told you they took my bags and backpack. They searched through everything and disposed of the items that were considered gay. No Calvin Klein underwear -especially boxer briefs. No tank tops, no tight

fitting pants or shirts, no sandals or flip-flops. They took me to buy new underwear and clothes to hold me until we all went shopping later. There can be no jewelry –a watch is the only exception for single men and a wedding ring for married men. If a man wants to wear a necklace it must be a cross so, that’s the only thing they let me keep: my gold crown of thorns cross necklace I was given by Pastor Daryl and the congregation at church after I won Regionals at the *Voices for Christ* competition in Indianapolis. There can be no secular music, only Christian, so they confiscated my Celine Dion CD’s and my CD player.

The counselors here keep us really busy. I’ve met all the guys here; there are 8 total. The 9th guy, Jeff, left about a week ago. It was his second time here. He was in the attic room. My room is on the second floor. There are 4 rooms and a shared bath on the second floor and the same on the 3rd floor. All the rooms are single occupancy to help us avoid temptation. The house is really old but has been well taken care of. This neighborhood is some kind of historic district. But you’d never know we are here. There is no sign or anything in the front yard saying, “Hey, there are gay guys in this house.” What neighbors I’ve met seem friendly enough. Most of the guys in here know the postman’s schedule and sneak letters out. Jeff is the one that taught me how to do it the first time. He was a nice guy. I’m going to miss him. They put his name on the chalkboard in our group therapy room. They call it the “Resurrection Room” because it’s where we are born again into our heterosexuality. They asked me to add Jeff’s name to the list of guys’ names on the chalkboard that have either quit the program or are considered “backsliders” –ones who have fallen back into homosexuality. During our group therapy meetings there is always one empty chair that symbolizes these guys. Tonight I am in charge of leading the prayer for Jeff, in hopes that he returns to Christ and Victory House. I kind of hope he does come back. He reminds me of you.

Things can get pretty intense in the Resurrection Room. It kind of freaks me out especially when the conversation is about those that refuse to change and then we are asked to pray that the Lord let them die so they can no longer spread evil. They pray that in death these lost souls on the chalkboard will find peace that passes all understanding in the next life. I usually just bow my head and force my mind to go blank. I can’t pray for anybody to die.

I was assigned a pray partner the second week I was here. His name is Keenan. He is a black guy from Chicago’s south side that got really involved in the crystal meth scene there. He is probably about your age. He said he used to “sell himself” on the “down low” to mostly married men. I can’t say I don’t like

him but his stories freak me out. He's done some really wild stuff. And I kind of feel like he's hitting on me sometimes. Keenan says that homosexuals are just confined straight people who have been deceived into thinking they're gay. He says meth only exacerbated his feelings toward men, but once he was cleansed of his addiction he began to see the life that God has been calling him to live. He says, "Healing is a process, a walk with Christ." He said he used to stay up for days at a time, his life controlled by meth. Now Christ controls his life. He said being gay is only an identity like being a meth addict, or living in a particular state, or being a certain kind of athlete. "Michael Jordan once identified himself as a basketball player," Keenan said, "it was his identity. But when Michael retired he no longer was a basketball player." Keenan is no longer a meth addict and is no longer gay. He says we can change our identity. To be honest I'm really confused. Mike the director of the clinic says that Keenan is the perfect example of what God's love can do. That we can all walk in Christ's light and have our prayers answered just like Keenan. Keenan sometimes is one of the 'Penis Police.' It kind of freaks me out that he may come into my room one night.

Three times a week the guys and me have to participate in behavior modification. It is usually in groups of four. They teach us how men are supposed to sit and cross their legs. I have to practice placing my right ankle on my knee – that is the only way. We go shopping for men's clothes at J.C. Penney and Sears. We are not allowed to shop in a mall and by all means must avoid Abercrombie and Fitch! They've even taken us to batting practice and bowling. I hate baseball. I can swing a bat and catch a ball. I played on the Ft. Sackville YMCA team all through grade school and middle school. I'd rather sing. Director Mike says I can sing, that Christian music is the opportunity for me to do so. When I told him I wanted to star on Broadway one day, he said I could. That one day God would answer my prayers and Broadway would see a Christian Musical. But until God is ready for that to happen, and only if Broadway recognizes God's plan, will I be able to sing there. Until then, I must trust in Him and let Him lead me.

We don't really get to watch television or movies. Computers are completely off limits. Last night they showed us an old black and white TV show called CBS Reports with Mike Wallace. The episode was called *The Homosexual*. Director Mike said the show had aired in the late 60's and over 40 million people watched it –that Mike Wallace was a consummate reporter, always did his research and was ready to present the facts, and that this episode stood the test of time. We discussed it in the Resurrection Room afterwards. Some of the guys made really valid points about the information in the show. I'm beginning to think there is something seriously wrong with me. Maybe it's good I'm here. These guys and Director Mike might be able to help me. I'm just so

confused and you're the only guy I've ever talked to about my feelings. You didn't judge me. You know what it's like. Am I crazy?

I need to go. I have Bible study in an hour and I haven't finished my reading. We are discussing Leviticus 18. Pastor Daryl has discussed this before in our youth group. I kind of know it but I need to do a refresher just in case.

Again, please don't let anyone see this letter or the other one. There is something inside me that needs to send you these and tell you what is happening. Don't freak out. I'm not in love with you or anything like that. But you made me feel good about myself and when

I write to you I feel good about myself.

I hope everyone at the restaurant is well. I miss everybody so much. I wish you could tell them I said hello. But don't.

Sincerely,

Trace

P.S. I failed my 40-day evaluation. It looks like I'm going to be here the entire 6 months. Jeff told me before he left that everyone fails it.

I wanted to rescue Trace. I wanted to tell him he was not crazy, he was beautiful and God loved him just as he was, that the song "Just As I Am" in the Baptist Hymnal confirmed it. It's the solo he sang so beautifully when leading the choir on his last Easter Sunday performance. I wanted to tell him he could follow his dream to Broadway. Yes he was 17. Yes his parents were currently in control, but he would be 18 one day and free from their choking grip, free to make

his own decisions, free to take charge of his life. My mind ached, trying to figure out a logical way to save him without making things worse. He'd trusted me and now he was paying the price for having listened to me. But it seemed he still trusted me, or why would he risk sending me letters? I wanted to tell him his parents ate in the restaurant last Sunday and ignored me. I wanted to tell him that Daryl and I ran into each other on Main Street and all but ended up in a fistfight. That I screamed at him for his lack of compassion, that I accused him of being a hypocrite, that I asked him how he could contribute to the destruction of someone's psyche and self-worth. "How do you sleep at night?" I asked. I wanted to tell Trace his parents and Pastor Daryl were not representative of Christ's message. How could I begin to let Trace know my thoughts when I too, was beginning to step back into the closet in order to protect the restaurant? Trace needed something to hold onto. So did I. His letter seemed like hands losing their grip, about to slip off the side of a cliff. I didn't know if he would survive the fall. I didn't know if I could either.

Chapter Twenty

- The Gospel of WVC -

During the weeks following Trace's letters my family's world began its titanic transformation. Business at the restaurant began to decrease. The gossip surrounding Trace's coming out and having been sent away, the realization to whom Pastor Daryl was speaking during his Easter sermon put the community on high alert. The congregation of Wabash Valley Baptist Church and by proxy the rest of the community began to steer clear of Daniels' Family Buffet and me.

Loyal customers who had eaten with us for generations, their families, their family's families began to boycott Daniels' Family Buffet just as Pastor Daryl had asked.

My parents received letters in the mail admonishing them for allowing me to manage the restaurant and in doing so trying to "convert Trace Thompson, an impressionable 17 year old Christian boy, into homosexuality." Hate mail, mostly anonymous, some with signatures, began arriving at the restaurant. One woman even wrote a poem:

Daniels' Family Buffet was once divine,
Its atmosphere, great food and desserts,
Gave our town a wonderful place to dine.
But like the Garden of Eden, the apple, and the snake,
Your homosexual son has destroyed Daniels' Buffet,
Bringing upon you God's wrath in his wake.
Send your son away, to Miami Beach and his gay kind.
Return Daniels' Buffet to its Christian ways,
You still have time.

-A Loyal Customer NO Longer

It seemed we were getting stacks of hate mail. Enough to be bundled with a heavy duty rubber band. The Wabash Valley Christians were pissed. Answering my phone was not an option; it would likely be an angry, former customer cursing. “Go to Hell!” one caller shouted. I replied, “I don’t have to. I’m already there!”

The restaurant began receiving calls too, similar mail.

All of us, my family and our employees, were trying to work through the uproar. None of us were feeling particularly well. But my dad was looking especially rough. On Wednesday morning before July 4th, a few minutes after 8am, my phone rang. Mom and Dad had both gone into the restaurant early. I didn’t want to answer the phone to be told that I was a fag and I would burn in Hell. But I did. I answered it. I heard my mother’s voice screaming frantically through the receiver, “Come here! Now! Something’s happened to your Dad!”

“What?” I asked.

“Get here now!”

I ran across the street and woke Cam, told him to throw on some clothes; we had to get to the restaurant. Something had happened.

Only minutes after Mom’s phone call Cameron and I pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot amidst the flashing lights of an ambulance, fire rescue, and two fire trucks. *What the hell happened? Why this kind of response?* It seemed all of Ft. Sackville’s emergency medical personnel had arrived. Their presence alone would send tongues wagging all over town. I could imagine the gossipmongers, “Collin Daniels’ gay son has ruined the business; C.J.’s had another heart attack. Probably got his bank statement.”

The EMT's were gathering their gear, rushing through the front door.

I pulled around back, parked, and Cameron and I entered the back kitchen door, then ran through the kitchen into the office. My mother, standing along its back wall, was crying hysterically. Dad was gray, motionless on the floor in front of his desk. The EMT's began resuscitation. He wasn't breathing. He had no pulse.

I yelled to Mom across the commotion, "What happened?" There'd never been so many people jammed inside the office.

"He's dead!" she cried. "He turned in his chair, his eyes rolled back then he fell. He was so heavy. I tried to turn him on his back. I screamed 911. I called you."

"We got 'em," one of the EMT's announced. My Dad jerked. "He's back. He's back with us," said the medic clasping the defibrillator paddles. He'd brought my Dad back to life. In that moment it seemed there was no solid ground. I didn't know how to stand firmly in this new world. Nothing was what it had been.

The EMT's loaded my Dad on the gurney. As they rolled him out of the office, an oxygen mask strapped to his face, he saw my brother crying. Dad tried to grab Cameron's forearm, but the medics were in the way and moved too quickly as they guided the gurney between tables and chairs. Mom, Cameron, and I followed behind. Dad couldn't speak. His eyes said, *I'm sorry*, as they wheeled him out the front door, then hoisted him into the ambulance. Cameron helped Mom into the back so she could ride with Dad. "Cameron, get my car, follow us. Grey, you stay here," she said before the driver shut the doors, prior to speeding off to Mercy Memorial.

She'd call when she knew something.

Cameron and I watched the emergency vehicles leave, the ambulance racing down Highway 41. My world was a vacuum collapsing within itself, like a Styrofoam cup taken to the depths of the ocean. So far this morning had been the summer's nadir.

To an outsider my Mom's words from the back of the ambulance would seem odd, considering moments earlier Dad was dead. Yet to me it was completely logical, understandable. For three generations the restaurant had been priority number one.

Cameron took off in Mom's car; I walked back into the restaurant. Outside the office door our employees lingered between front of the house and back of the house, uncertain of what had just taken place. Their lives had become a pressure cooker too. All of us were exhausted. This turn of events added to our collective anxiety.

"Let's get back to work. We still have to open this place at 10:30," I said. I didn't know from where the voice had come. I recognized it as mine, yet it sounded militant. Compassionless. All business. Slowly the employees returned to their duties.

At the hospital the cardio-thoracic surgeon told my Mom that Dad's right lung had stopped functioning, had become entrapped. A plaque had enveloped it. The lung could no longer expand thus forcing his left one to overcompensate. The stress was too much for his heart. Adding to this, fluid had collected between his lung and chest wall, in the pleura. The fluid would be drained, but he required surgery to remove the plaque, "It'll be like peeling an orange," the surgeon said. The operation required removal of the fifth rib on his right side in order to access the lung. Surgery was scheduled for July 5th. We knew surgery meant Dad would spend months recuperating at home, his recovery capricious. He had undergone the same surgery on his left lung, after having been

diagnosed with Asbestosis, a result of his naval service during the Viet Nam war, just two years earlier. Mom's intuition had been spot on. I was glad I had come home.

During an afternoon break from the restaurant, I went to my parents' house, where Mom and I decided to sit outside on the front porch step, to enjoy some fresh air. We kept the door cracked behind us so we could hear Dad in case he needed something. He'd been home from Mercy Memorial for about a week.

I loved the front door of their house. It was a 12-foot, mahogany, arched door with leaded glass. Its matching side-light panels collected sunlight in a prism of color. After remodeling the gabled house, they had the yard professionally landscaped, its various annuals and perennials growing, blooming in the shades of the seasons. Sitting there looking at Mom's dwarf Irises under the window of my dad's home-office, blue ones like Grandma Augusta once had in her yard, I realized it was the only peaceful July afternoon, or any quiet afternoon of that summer we'd had together. An opportunity to talk. It became one of those conversations that emblazons itself upon my memory.

Collected like sunlight in the windows of my parents' front door.

"I get it," Mom said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I get it. I understand my mother. You realize I'm almost exactly the age she was."

"I don't get it."

“You saw your Dad’s prescription bottles lined up on the bedside table. The heart medication, lung medication, Ambien, Loratab. The bandages. Antiseptic. His nebulizer. That rehabilitation thingy he uses to strengthen his lungs – inspiratory muscle training they called it. All of it. He even said it, our bedroom looks like a goddamn hospital room.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I mean I get it. The house in Hartwell, the one I grew up in. *My* dad’s bedroom. The front one where you and I used to sleep when you were little, following the divorce. It looked like a hospital room after *his* surgery. *My* mother had to take care of *him*. And raise my brothers, sister, me. You’re able to take care of yourself but I still have Cameron to raise, the restaurant to run.”

After Dad’s massive heart attack several years earlier it had taken him a long time to bounce back from surgery. Then two years ago he’d had his first lung surgery. After *this* operation he looked and felt worse. He’d lost weight.

“I don’t know if he can survive this. If *I* can survive this. After my dad died I felt guilty for not helping my mother more in caring for him,” she said. “I get it now. I understand the pressure she was under. Why she acted the way she did. I’m the age she was.”

I’d heard the story before. My Grandpa Cecil McGregor had been a coal miner all his life. His dad had been one too. The Red Ember Coal Mine operated a few miles south of Hartwell off Highway 67, near Beehunter, Indiana. My grandpa was pit boss. He worked for James Stackhound. My house on Kelso Creek Road, the one in which Kirk

and I had lived before our break-up and my move to Miami Beach, had been Mr. Stackound's house; he had built it and raised his family there.

My mother remembered the day in 1952. "It was a day like this," she said. "The door bell rang, my brother Conner and I were in the living room fighting over Lincoln Logs, I heard mom open the kitchen door, whispered conversation, then she screamed."

Mr. Stackhound had come to tell Grandma Augusta that Grandpa Cecil had suffered a terrible mine accident. He'd been rushed to Mercy Memorial. His right leg had been crushed under a rail car, one that lowered miners into the earth's murky, underground corridors. Mom remembered the day her dad came home from the hospital, his leg amputated at the thigh, in its place a wooden prosthetic. Her father would need long-term rehabilitation. Their medical insurance only covered thirty days of hospitalization. Recovery would have to be at home. He was homebound for a year.

I began to see the similarities.

"You have to remember all four of us were still living at home," she said.

My uncle Mathew was the oldest, then aunt Kerry, my Mom, followed by Mom's baby brother Conner. The house had two bedrooms, one bathroom. There were bunk beds positioned in what was supposed to be the dining room. Mathew's room was an enclosed front porch. Theirs was a seven gabled pre-war home unlike that of my parents' four bedroom, three bath house, with its soaring 15 foot dining room window—a crystal cathedral, Grandma Augusta use to say. The horrific results of my Grandpa's mining accident put my Mom's family in serious financial distress. Having a husband to tend and children to raise kept Grandma at home, unable to seek employment.

“That winter Mr. Stackhound made sure coal was delivered to heat our house, free of charge, which helped some during dad’s recovery. Dad was a company man, not union. He wasn’t getting a paycheck. Mom had to get what meager assistance she could from Social Security benefits to see us through. Meals of bean soup and cornbread became more frequent.”

“Are you afraid we’re not going to eat? We own a restaurant, for Christ’s sake. We eat there,” I said trying to lighten the mood.

“Kerry’s bedroom became dad’s recuperation room. The whole feeling changed. I used to sleep there with her, big feather pillows, a cozy pink chenille bedspread. There was a metal lamp shaped like a tulip that sat on the nightstand. It was my favorite. When dad moved in everything switched. Mom had to keep layers of protective rubber pads over the mattress. She used white sheets so they could be bleached. The tulip lamp sitting on one of her hand-stitched doilies, embroidered with spring flowers, was replaced with a bedpan, urine sugar test strips, Tucks pads, and a small stainless steel spoon she would insert in my dad’s rectum to help with his bowel movements.”

My Mom talked about how life had transformed for them. The daily, familiar sounds of the house had ceased. “It was as if our home stopped breathing, its lungs entrapped too,” she said. “Mathew and Kerry took over most daily duties, watching us kids.”

Her brother Conner and she were too young to help.

She spoke of her dad’s bandages, blood blisters, his black and blue leg stump that looked like a burnt fire-log. The often grotesque, humiliating recovery he had suffered. The morphine.

A year later my Grandpa McGregor returned to work, never fully himself. Grandma Augusta once told my Mom that Mr. Stackhound said Cecil McGregor was one of the best pit bosses he'd ever employed.

“Things sort of went back to normal, until 1965,” Mom said. “*That* July the bottom fell out from under our world.”

“What? Do you think the bottom's falling out from under ours?” I replied. “Is that what you're thinking?”

“I don't know. It's just this all seems so familiar. That's why I said, *I get it.*”

Chapter Twenty-One

- Letter 3-

I received his Trace's third and last letter in September.

Dear Grey,

I want you to know that now you can share my letters with whomever you please. I'm asking you to share them. I've figured out how to solve my illness. My parents arrive today and I'll be in my bath. They'll think I'm running late. I've chosen an honorable death –an alternative to the tyranny of my parents, Pastor Daryl, and Victory House. My choice is the preferred method of the ancient Romans. I will end my suffering like Seneca. My name *will not* be written on the chalkboard in the Resurrection Room. My name *will not* be the whispered words of my "brothers in Christ" praying to God for my death and peace that passes all understanding. My story *will not* be that of a "backslider."

Trace's parents' visit was the first since they'd dropped him off five months ago. It was Labor Day weekend and he'd been granted a pass to spend the holiday weekend with them. It would be his first time away from Victory House. His mother and father were arriving at 5pm to pick him up and they were going to Spring Valley Retreat, an outdoor ministry owned by several evangelical congregations in southeast Minnesota. Director Mike had told Trace the retreat was about 4 hours from Fergus Falls, so Trace needed to be ready to go when his parents arrived. I found this out after Myrna Boil cornered Mom in the restaurant and told her every sordid detail regarding Victory House "As I was told," she said, "by Pastor Daryl from his private conversations with the Thompsons. Grey needs to know what his done. The Thompsons want Grey to know."

I imagined Trace in the bathroom, I could picture the claw foot iron tub and the white Quarter-sized tile floor, the white porcelain toilet –its water tank mounted on the wall above the seat and a matching pedestal sink with a chrome mirrored medicine cabinet framed above it.

In the bathroom Trace is barefoot and bare-chested. The floor feels cold beneath his feet. He folds his t-shirt, placing it neatly upon the toilet seat lid. Unbuckling his belt, then slipping out of his blue jeans and white Fruit of the Loom briefs, he folds them and then rolls his brown leather belt into a tight circle, placing the items on top of his t-shirt. Standing naked, he wears only his gold necklace and cross –fashioned to resemble Christ’s crown of thorns. His buttermilk skin and blond hair give yellow contrast to the white Victorian paleness of the bathroom. Walking to the tub, he sits on the edge, turns on the hot and cold water and adjusts the ancient chrome handles while placing one hand beneath the flowing water to gauge the temperature. After plugging the tub drain with the rubber stopper, he crosses the room to the bathroom door to check and see it’s locked. Steam rises from the tub, fogging the mirror as Trace makes his way back to the tub and slips in.

At first the heat of the water stings but his body slowly adjusts. The old cast iron tub is three quarters full as Trace leans forward, slowing the faucet to a trickle –he doesn’t want it to overflow, yet. Reclining, he looks at his body, his thighs, knees and feet under the water. He considered the seventeen years he spent sculpting and molding it with athletics he never wanted to play. He thinks about his voice, which he also sculpted and molded and did enjoy improving. He thinks about his dreams of Broadway. He was supposed to be a dancer. His arms, torso, legs, and feet –with proper training– could have been a dancer’s body. He has the voice. Trace studies himself, liking what he sees. He begins humming his favorite hymn, “Just As I Am.”

“Trace!” the voice on the other side of the bathroom door shouts. It’s Keenan, checking on him. “Trace! Are you in there?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Director Mike was wondering if you’re getting ready. He was looking for you. He wanted me to remind you to be on time.”

“I will.”

“OK. See you in a bit.”

Trace sits up and slips off his necklace. Sinking back into the warm water, he holds the cross between his right forefinger and thumb. He was so happy the day he won the music regional. Everybody’s eyes were on him. Pastor Daryl was so proud. Trace remembers the small gift box and the silver paper in which the gift had been wrapped. He’d worn the cross ever since off. “This cross of thorns is to remind you, Trace, of what Christ did for you, for all of us. May you wear it willingly and walk mighty in His light,” Pastor Daryl said. Trace positions the cross of thorns so it is inverted. Turning his left wrist upward he slices his artery lengthwise, the first squirt of blood startling him. *It doesn’t hurt.* Not like he thought it would. Scraping his knees on the asphalt as a little kid hurt worse. He digs deeper, two more times, to open the wound wide. Then, placing the bloodied cross between his left forefinger and thumb he turns his right wrist up and slices open that artery also. This time the squirt of blood doesn’t shock him. *My left hand isn’t as strong.* It take four tries to dig the artery open. *I can’t believe it doesn’t hurt.*

Bending his head, he slips the necklace back around his neck. The crimson cross of thorns nestles into its usual place on his chest. Relaxing back, he slips his wrists into the water, its warmth soothing his wounds. He watches his seventeen years of life flow from him quickly, all the pain gone, and nothing but the warmth and tenderness of the water’s embrace.

Twenty minutes later Trace's heart stopped. The tub began overflowing – the cherry-colored water covering the tile floor, then seeping beneath the locked bathroom door. The dark carpet in the second floor hall was saturated when the doorbell rang.

Trace's parents had arrived.

Myrna told Mom that Mr. and Mrs. Thompson stepped into the front foyer.

“Welcome,” Director Mike said. “It's so good to see you. Trace is excited about his weekend.”

“We're excited to see him,” Mr. Thompson said.

“Has he been well behaved?” Mrs. Thompson asked. “Keeping his room clean? Picking up after himself?”

“Yes. Absolutely. He's a fine young man. And he's made wonderful progress,” Director Mike said.

“Great news,” Mr. Thompson said. “We're looking forward to spending time with him at the retreat and hearing about his experience, about what he's learned.”

“I think you'll find God has changed his heart.” Director Mike motioned toward the adjoining room. “Have a seat in the parlor; I'll get him.”

“Oh. Mike, do you mind if I go? I'd like to surprise him,” Mr. Thompson said.

“Not at all. Do you remember which room is his? It’s the last door on the left, nearest the bathroom.”

Mr. Thompson nodded, then turned and ascended the staircase while Mrs. Thompson and Director Mike stepped into the parlor and sat down. Keenan met them with glasses of iced tea.

Upon reaching the landing of the second floor hall, Mr. Thompson stepped onto the soaked carpet, his Rockport shoes sinking beneath his heavy step. He stood there a moment, shifting his weight from foot to foot, pressing his shoes into the carpet. Turning to face the staircase he called out, “Hey! Mike! I think you’ve got a water leak.”

Mike appeared at the foyer base of the steps. “Excuse me?”

“I think you’ve got a water leak. The carpet is soaked.”

Mrs. Thompson appeared behind Director Mike, holding her glass of iced tea.

“A leak?” Mike asked doubtfully.

“Seems so. It’s quite a bit of water from the looks of it.”

Mike hurried up the stairs with Mrs. Thompson following. Soon all three were standing next to one another shifting their weight back and forth in their shoes, pressing water from the carpet.

“This is strange,” Mike said. “There are no water pipes on this end of the house. Only the bathroom at the end of the hall.”

Mr. Thompson stopped shifting. He looked toward the closed bathroom door. Panic overcame him. He ran down the hall, his khaki pant cuffs soaking up the red tinged water. Upon arriving at the oak door he pounded his fist on its ornate wood while trying to turn the doorknob with his other hand.

“It’s locked!” Mr. Thompson said. “It’s locked! I thought there were no locks on the doors. Trace! Trace! Are you there! My God, the door is locked!”

Mrs. Thompson dropped her iced tea. The glass, cushioned by the wet carpet, rolled toward the steps then under the banister and shattered on the wood floor of the foyer below. “Trace!” She screamed.

In a moment Mike was behind Mr. Thompson. He tried forcing the knob to unlock the bathroom door. Mr. Thompson pounded harder with both fists. “Trace! Trace! Unlock the door!” Other men, who’d been going about their evening chores preparing for dinner or yard work, heard the commotion and began appearing at the top of the steps. Mrs. Thompson stood as if frozen, gripping the staircase’s second floor newl post, her knuckles white. She watched as Director Mike and Mr. Thompson began using their bodies in an attempt to break down the bathroom door. On the third try their body slams ripped the frame from the plaster and lathe wall. Mr. Thompson and Mike fell on top of the door as it crashed upon the bathroom’s tile floor. From the end of the hall Mrs. Thompson saw her son’s head turned toward her, resting on his right shoulder, his eyes open and fixed in a stare, above the overflowing claw foot tub. Standing on the landing behind Mrs. Thompson, Keenan caught her as she collapsed unconscious into his arms.

It had happened. There was nothing I could do. Although I finished reading his letter, Trace was dead. I was numb, fixed in my desk chair, my mind blank.

Don’t be angry with me or feel sorry for me. I have chosen this. I’m OK with it. My family is not like your family, they would have never been OK with me being gay. You’re so lucky to have people that love you for who you are. I don’t feel that. Mother and Father, even Pastor Daryl, always expected something from me. I was never going to have the opportunity to be myself. I’m a disappointment to them and to God. But I’m not disappointed in myself. I’m

proud that I have the courage to end this. Please, Grey, don't be disappointed in me. I really wish we could've become friends. I would've liked having you in my life. I never had a brother. I kind of think of you as my big brother. Thank you for everything you did for me. Once I'm on the other side I'm going to ask God to forgive me and then I'm going to ask if I can be your guardian angel. I'm going to protect you.

With love.

Your little brother,

Trace

I heard my front door open. A moment later Cam appeared in the doorway of my study, trying to catch his breath, his face red and sweaty.

"Trace committed suicide," he said.

I laid the letter on my desk and looked at my little brother standing there, visibly shaken, waiting for my reaction. "I know," I said. "He just told me."

Chapter Twenty-Two

- The Beating -

Over the course of the next month Trace's suicide erupted into a full-fledged Ft. Sackville scandal and the restaurant suffered because of it. Business, especially regular customers from the Wabash Valley Baptist Church, avoided Daniel's Family Buffet.

For 55 years the transition of seasons from autumn to the winter holidays witnessed a surge in customer counts at the restaurant. This was the first year the count dropped significantly. After closing on a Saturday night I was studying the day's receipts, I had no plans and decided to spend the silent hours catching up on bookkeeping. The numbers were not good; in fact, they were terrifying.

The employees had gone home for the night and I was alone in the empty restaurant, when I heard popping sounds on the back exterior wall. I got up from the desk chair, left the office and headed toward the back-of-the-house service and employee entrance. As I walked through the kitchen I spotted the yellow mop bucket filled with dirty mop water and the mop propped in the dish-room corner near it. *They never empty the mop bucket. I've got to do that before I leave.*

When I got to the door I heard glass breaking, as if soda bottles were being thrown against the brick wall. I looked through the door's peephole but saw no one. I'd left my keys in the office; the back door was locked but could be opened from inside by its emergency crash-bar. Opening the door, I stepped out far enough to look around. In that moment a glass beer bottle shattered on the wall beside me. Startled, I jumped out of the way, dodging the blast, unaware

that I had stepped away from the door. A muscular arm wrapped tight around my neck. I heard the restaurant's back door slam shut behind me.

As best I could tell there were three of them, shadows, two of similar height standing in front of me in the dark parking lot. The one holding me seemed biggest, his breath beating the top of my head. I could smell rot-gut liquor on him. I was sure they were local guys. I knew their kind. Perhaps they'd been drinking all day in the cab of a pickup truck or SUV while driving country roads, then later in a Main Street bar. I was certain they were young, the type that dressed up for church on Sunday after raising hell on Saturday night. "Queer baiting" was a game for them. They hunted in local parks, near the Wabash River, or on the campus of Ft. Sackville Community College. Like buck hunting, out-of-towners were an easy 8 point score for them. A local was tougher to get; when found, he'd garner 14 points – theirs was the same game once played by their fathers and grandfathers when hunting "niggers." These hunters judged their prey on physical characteristics or perceived differences in dress and attitude. I'd been linked to Trace's suicide. My hometown was talking and these good ol' boys took advantage of the town gossip to act and secure their bragging rights. While the muscled arm constricted my airway, I was kicked behind the knees and knocked to the pavement.

They wore sock hats, dark shirts, blue jeans, boots, and work gloves. Their shadowy farm-boy bodies, thick and stocky, were most likely beef and corn-fed, developed in the melon fields south of town.

I had never been punched. Forced to kneel by the Big Shadow, his arm holding me in position, his knees pressing my legs to the ground and his body pressed against my back holding it erect, he laughed while the other two shadows began taking turns; I felt their first blows to my face and head. "You like being on your knees, don't you, faggot," Big Shadow said. My ears and eyes filled with blood. *Why did I walk outside?* After a round of punches, the shortest shadow stopped and walked to a parked truck, while his twin shadow took swipes at my face, finding

great joy in my flinching. Short Shadow returned with an open beer bottle. “Open your mouth and deep throat this cocksucker,” he said. He forced my mouth open and shoved the bottle in, my teeth scraped the long neck glass and paper label, the warm beer churned in my throat, burned my esophagus. I couldn’t breathe. When he withdrew the bottle I threw up on him and myself. “You fucking faggot, I thought queers swallowed?” he said, and punched me in the jaw. He dropped the bottle; it rolled next to my leg. “Don’t touch his puke. The fucker probably has AIDS,” Big Shadow said. His arm released me. I threw up again then broke free. I grabbed the bottle by its neck and busted it on the pavement; the glass shattered, leaving a sharp jagged bottleneck. I brandished it like a knife.

“Oh, the queer thinks he’s going to cut us,” Big Shadow said.

“Just leave me alone,” I said.

“Oh, no, fag. You’re going to learn your lesson. You’re going to wish you never came back here.”

“Look, I don’t know what you want. I don’t have anything to give you. If you just leave I won’t do anything. I won’t say anything.” All the while I kept taking swipes at the three of them, the broken bottle my only defense.

“You should have stayed away from my cousin,” Short Shadow said, the one that tried to force the long neck beer bottle down my throat.

“I don’t know your cousin,” I said.

“Yes you do, you tried to get your faggot hands on him. Trace was my cousin,” he said.

I kept waving the broken bottle at them. “Look, Trace came to me. I never touched him. We just talked.”

“Well, you see where talking got you,” Big Shadow said.

Short Shadow and his twin charged me; I cut Short Shadow’s right arm.

“Fuck! He cut me. The faggot cut me. You’re gonna die now, queer.”

I tried to keep them at bay but was overpowered. Again I found myself with Big Shadow’s muscular arm around my neck, knocked to my knees while Short Shadow and Twin Shadow’s fists pounded my head. With each punch my nostrils filled with the smell of topsoil from their work gloves; I tasted earth and with each gasp of air I sucked and swallowed, my own blood.

The rear employee parking lot behind the restaurant was dark and far from the road, yelling for help did no good. It was clear they intended to scare me and possibly kill me. I thought I might die of asphyxiation from Big Shadow’s arm. *Was this how Robbie felt? Are my thoughts his? Did he think he was going to die?*

Twin Shadow switched with Big Shadow. For a moment I caught my breath before Twin Shadow’s arm wrapped around my throat and his knees pressed my legs to the pavement. Big Shadow took his turn. He must have had the gun all along. I never saw him leave to get it. He began whaling on me with the butt of his pistol. I began to lose consciousness. It was clear mine was not a beating; it was a killing. *I’m going to die.*

My body went limp. Everything became blurry. They released my throat and legs. I felt myself being dragged on my stomach by my ankles, the blacktop scraping and burning my face.

They pulled me between the dumpster and the burnt grease receptacle. I smelled the used fryer oil and rotting food. *This is where it will end.* They dropped my feet. Their boots began striking blows to my abdomen, ribs, arms, face, and legs. I was beaten from head to toe, pressed into the base of the dumpster, trying to find shelter against its metal wall. I didn't have the strength to protect myself or curl into a fetal position. My body seemed slack, devoid of muscle. I could not stop them. I begged. I cried. Tears and blood ran down my face. It must have been just after the butt of Big Shadow's pistol crashed against my skull that I heard a shriek but didn't realize it was my own voice. Everything slipped away.

I awakened to morning sunlight and EMTs placing me on a stretcher. An oxygen mask covered my nose and mouth; its air was dry and cool. Red lights flashed in my eyes. One of the men called me by my name. He told me to hold on. I slipped away, again.

Mr. Dumes is the reason I didn't die next to the restaurant's dumpster. He was the Hoosier Waste and Grease Removal truck driver. And for as many years as I can remember, every morning his route included trash pickup from the restaurant. Saturday morning when his truck approached the dumpster and its forks lifted and spilled the container's contents into the truck, he saw my body lying on the concrete beside the sludge soiled outline of the dumpster.

With the dumpster still positioned, frozen in space above the truck, he jumped from the cab and found I was unconscious but breathing. He called 911 from his cell phone. Mr. Dumes, the trash guy, saved my life.

Although it had rained that night I was caked in blood. The EMT's said I had lain there, most likely in and out of consciousness, all night and that I was lucky to have been knocked unconscious lying on my right side. I had vomited several times. Had I been on my back, they said, I would have choked to death. And lying curled next to the dumpster somewhat sheltered by it may have prevented hypothermia. I had been protected from the wet weather.

Being hoisted onto the gurney and loaded in the ambulance is a hazy memory, as are the first few hours I spent in the emergency room at Mercy Memorial Hospital. I was asked by EMT's, then the attending emergency room physician and nurses, what had happened but I was unable to gather my thoughts. I kept telling them I forgot to empty the mop bucket, I got in a fight then hit my head, and I had a bad headache. I remember Doc Vonderbreck showing up. I was told later I smiled when he appeared bedside. He said I looked as if I'd won the fight and that the mop bucket must surely be in worse shape. He ordered a CT scan and a while later I was taken to a dimly lit room, placed on a scanning table, and told to lie still. A voice over the intercom told me to relax. The table began to slide horizontally and it seemed I was floating into a huge white donut hole. I remember the scan's enormous whirling hum. Afterward I was back in the emergency room.

When the test results came back my parents were told I'd suffered a blunt trauma to the head, causing an open fracture and an intracerebral hemorrhage. The pressure against my skull and brain was increasing from the bleeding. The CT tech and emergency room doctor insisted I be prepped for surgery, my head shaved, so they could temporarily remove part of the bone and

allow my brain to expand. Once the swelling subsided, possibly over the next 48 to 72 hours, they said, I would undergo surgery to replace the bone. Doc Vonderbreck said absolutely not!

“Get him out of here,” Doc said. My parents, still in shock, did not comprehend his demand. “Tell me you want him transferred.”

“What?” Dad asked.

“Tell me you want him transferred. Doc Floyd is the neuro-surgeon and that drunk son-of-a-bitch will kill him.”

“Transferred where?” Dad asked.

“Get him to Evansville. Call Mitchell’s Ambulance and we’ll get him to Deaconess. Let them do additional tests there. These assholes don’t know what they’re doing.”

My parents trusted Doc. He’d been our family’s general practitioner for years. His father was a respected and trusted doctor and had delivered both my Mom and Dad.

“We want him transferred,” Mom said.

“Yes. Transfer him,” Dad said.

The next thing I remember Mr. Mitchell was loading me into his ambulance and we left Mercy Memorial. My next memory was in Evansville when I awakened inside another donut hole to the hum of another CT scan at Deaconess Hospital.

My first 48 hours at Deaconess were a blur. I stopped vomiting. The neurosurgeon there placed me in ICU to monitor the swelling of my brain –he would open my skull as a last resort. My parents and brother were the only family members allowed to see me ten minutes every two hours. Once my brain swelling began to subside I came around. I stayed in ICU for ten days. After the first 48 hours my family was allowed to stay in my room. Mom, Dad, and Cam rarely left, and never all at once.

My memory of the attack returned in fragments, like putting together a shattered mirror. The ‘incident’ had been reported and Mom and Dad called the Ft. Sackville Police department on several occasions to follow up. Each time they got the same answer: there would be an investigation once I was feeling better. Perhaps once I was home recovering.

My Dad was enraged. It seemed the police were trying to avoid an investigation he thought. “How can we investigate when he doesn’t remember?” Dad was told by the police chief –a deacon at Wabash Valley Baptist Church. My Mom, as upset, tried to refocus her anger on my care and recovery. She asked Dad to do the same. I lay in my hospital bed listening to them. There was comfort in my parents’ whispered arguing. It reminded me of being a little kid and eavesdropping behind closed doors when they were upset about restaurant finances, employees – or Grandpa Collin.

“Someone attacked *our* son on *our* property,” Dad said. “It’s a violent... criminal attack. They’re supposed to protect people. Investigate! Ask questions! Look for evidence for Christ’s sake!”

“CJ, I know. I get it. But right now *our* priority is to make sure Grey’s okay. That he survives this. When he’s out of the woods then I’ll be angry,” Mom said. “Then we’ll go after whoever did this.”

My parents were scared. Yet I wasn't. It was as if I had no troubles, cares, or worries. For the first time since returning to Indiana I didn't feel anxious. Something or someone was taking care of me. My fears had been realized and I survived them. I remember thinking about how I felt. *Was it peace?* Just then Mom and Dad stopped talking. They turned to look toward the door. I turned my head, too, and watched Kirk walk into my hospital room. Almost a year had passed since I stopped overnight at his townhouse, the one he shared with his lover Jackson, in Nashville, Tennessee during my trek back to Ft. Sackville from Miami Beach. We hadn't seen each other or spoken since.

Chapter Twenty-Three

- Tropicana Kirk -

Kirk walked into my hospital room carrying a small vase of Tropicana roses. He had remembered their coral color was my favorite. We'd once built a rose garden along the exterior wall of our house garage on Kelso Creek Road. He smiled, sat them on the windowsill then hugged Mom, Dad, and Cam.

"I think we'll leave you two alone," Mom said. And for the first time since I had been hospitalized all three of my family left the room.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came to see if you were OK," Kirk said. "I tried to come earlier but they wouldn't allow me in. They said visitation was restricted to family members only."

"You drove up here from Nashville?"

"Well, yeah, sort of. Jesus Grey, I'm not cold-hearted. I get pissed off at you sometimes but I don't want you dead."

"I didn't mean it that way. Everything's still a little foggy I guess. Sometimes I don't know if I'm making sense," I said.

"Oh, trust me. You were that way long before you had a head injury," Kirk said smiling.

"Fuck you," I said. Kirk leaned in and kissed me. We kissed long and passionate like we once did. I couldn't help but get excited.

“Well, it looks like everything’s in working order,” Kirk said with a giggle, looking at my erection pressing against the thin cotton sheet. My face flushed with an embarrassing heat.

“Whoa. I wasn’t expecting that,” I said.

“Not had one of those in awhile?” Kirk asked, his eyes directed toward my groin.

“Not *that*,” I said. “I haven’t got any underwear on. Just this damn hospital gown. I’m talking about a kiss from *you*.”

“It’s nice to see I haven’t lost my touch,” Kirk said feigning an attempt to lift the sheet.

“No, you haven’t,” I said, playfully knocking his hand away and reaching down to try and reposition myself. “This is exactly what I need, a nurse coming in and seeing you in the room and me laying here with a hard on. Where is Jackson? Does he know you’re here?”

“I don’t know if he does or not,” Kirk said.

“What do you mean you don’t know if he does or not?”

“I mean I don’t care if he knows. We broke up.”

“What?”

“Yeah. We ended it. A few months after you stayed the night. He moved out and we sold the townhouse,” Kirk said.

“Where are you living?”

“I just moved back to mom’s.”

“You’re in Mt. Vernon? You moved back to Indiana? What about your job in Nashville?”

“I quit. I was over it too,” Kirk said.

“Over it too? I don’t understand? *You* broke up with Jackson?”

“Yeah, sort of,” he said. Kirk paused a moment. “It sure doesn’t seem like your having any problems thinking. You’re still able to grill me pretty good.”

“I’m just shocked that’s all. Everything seemed so perfect. You seemed happy,” I said.

“Well, looks can be deceiving I guess.”

“How’d it happen?”

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you,” Kirk said.

“No. Well... maybe a little,” I said.

“I caught him on Manhunt. He’d been chatting with some guy on there, they’d apparently met a couple of times.”

“How’d you end it?”

“Well, funny you should ask. I started with emptying the curio of our collection of Martini glasses. I smashed every last one on the dining room floor. Then I ground them into the wood with my boots.” He paused, “It’s a shame really, Jackson worked so hard installing that wood floor,” Kirk said with a twisted grin.

I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. The idea of Jackson looking at smashed glass littering the floor of their perfectly immaculate townhouse dining room seemed a kind of poetic justice. Kirk began laughing also. It was a relief to be laughing together.

“You didn’t?” I asked.

I laughed until my head began throbbing.

“Yep, I sure did. Fucker pissed me off.”

I had tears of laughter in my eyes.

“What did he say when he saw what you’d done?” I asked.

“What could he say? He had no defense. He’s lucky I didn’t torch the whole damn townhouse.” Kirk paused again. “You’re not the only one who can pull a Bette Davis move.”

It was nice having Kirk in my hospital room. It was the first time I’d laughed since being beaten. Since before being beaten. He made me feel better.

“So what have the police said,” Kirk asked, sitting down on my bedside.

“Apparently they’re not doing anything. They’re waiting until I get home and have recovered somewhat. Dad says they say there’s not much they can do since there were no witnesses or security cameras.”

“What? You’re fucking kidding me!”

“No. They’re going to let me tell them my story. They saw the blood, the broken bottles, but there seems to be no evidence linking any of it to anyone other than me. It rained that night and they say there’s nothing they can do,” I said.

“Are your parents going to contact someone else? They FBI? Isn’t there somebody they can sue?” Kirk asked.

“If the police chief and the county sheriff aren’t interested in investigating do you really think they’re going to get anyone else to check it out? Actually, I’m kind of relieved. I was always fearful something would happen and now it has. Now I have no reason to be afraid anymore.”

“This is bullshit, Grey. Someone almost killed you. There’s got to be something you and your family can do.”

“Ultimately it’s up to me. I’m the one that must press charges. It’s not worth it. Nobody’s going to do anything, Kirk. They’ll do the same thing they did with Robbie Palmer’s murder. It’ll end up being sound and fury resulting in nothing. Mom, Dad, Cam and I have been talking. I really want to go back to Miami Beach, back to my teaching job. I hate Indiana. Mom and Dad are thinking of locking up the restaurant for good. We’re all tired. The employees are tired. We don’t want to fight it any longer,” I said.

“Seriously? What will they do, sell it?” Kirk asked.

“I think they’re going to try,” I said. I told Kirk that two weeks before my attack Mom and Dad had contacted Anna Benjamin about a commercial real estate agent named Hank Wissing in Indianapolis. Anna was licensed to sell residential but not commercial. Wissing Commercial Brokers had *For Sale* signs on a few pieces of commercial property in Evansville and on a local building, a former Walgreens, in the Ft. Sackville Shopping Center. Dad was recovering from his surgery but didn’t feel he’d ever regain the stamina and strength needed to operate the restaurant as he once did. He knew Mom would not want to handle it alone and I was a temporary solution for her and him. Perhaps selling it would solve everyone’s dilemma –ours was prime commercial real estate since the new Walmart Supercenter had opened across the street from us. Perhaps selling the property would allow Mom and Dad to retire and I could return to teaching in south Florida.

“I’m the one that suggested Anna. I told them to have *her* call this Wissing guy. She’s knows real estate lingo. That way they wouldn’t have to deal with him directly.” I told Kirk that Anna called Hank Wissing and scheduled a meeting with him the following week to come look at the property.

“After we met and showed him the restaurant we decided to go to her office and discuss everyone’s thoughts. We didn’t want Anna and Hank hanging around the restaurant to long; it might stir questions. The last thing we needed was employees and customers thinking we were selling out,” I said.

“What’d he think of the place?” Kirk asked.

“He was impressed. He couldn’t believe its size. We showed him pictures of people lined out the door and around the corner of the building waiting to get in to eat,” I said.

“So what’d he say?” Kirk asked.

“Honestly? I don’t recall much of the conversation. I was distracted during the meeting. I saw a side of Anna I’d never seen before. She was all flirty and school-girl giggly with Hank.” Kirk knew that Anna was an attractive woman. “Hank reminded me of a Kenny Rogers type guy, salt and pepper hair with rugged football player features. After our meeting I stayed in Anna’s office to get the scoop. “What’s up with the school girl crush?” I asked her.”

“Whatever do you mean?” she said.

“Oh give me a break. You know exactly what I mean.”

Anna giggled. “Was I obvious?”

“Yes. Quite. The vibe was palpable.”

“Didn’t you think he was hot?”

“Well, yeah, sort of. If you like the country and western type. But remember, you’re married.”

“Just because I’m married doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

“Anna, *that* was not looking. You all but undressed him right there in front of us.”

“And let me tell you what I saw looked *gooooood*,” she said. Besides, its not like I touched the merchandise. I only window-shopped. You men do it all the time. Gay or straight.”

“Yeah, well, I suppose we do. Just don’t fuck this thing up with him. We need to do something about the restaurant. I don’t want to die a lonely old gay man running a buffet restaurant in Ft. Sackville, Indiana.”

“Have I ever let you down? Didn’t I sell your house on Forest in 6-weeks? Didn’t you make your money back twice over? I’m the one that hooked you up with great financing and a house on the golf course –a house any man thirty years older than you would’ve killed to have. Jesus, I snatched that Kelso Creek Road deal right out from under that bitch Melanie Moody at M&M Reality. You know her client was pissed you got that house.”

“Yes, I know. You’re the Ft. Sackville real estate Wonder Woman. You’re a sales goddess. Just don’t fuck this up,” I said.

“Damn you’re bitchy today. When’s the last time *you* got laid?”

“You don’t worry about that,” I said.

“Whatever. Get the hell out of my office so I can sell that restaurant,” Anna said.

I kissed her on the cheek and said goodbye.

“If Mom and Dad do decide to sell the restaurant Anna will have their back,” I said. “And if she doesn’t sell it Dad says the way he feels at this point, since all this, he’d let the bank have it.” I paused a moment to lift myself against the pillows behind me.

“You know Kirk, I didn’t realize it when I first came back but Dad’s medical bills have practically wiped them out. Dad’s health insurance cancelled him after his heart attack. He can’t get insurance now. They’ve been paying his bills with their savings and money from the restaurant.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah. It’s all been fucked up for some time now. More than I ever knew,” I said.

There was a long pause in our conversation. Kirk and I held each other’s gaze. He leaned down and kissed me again.

“Well, I’m here. And I’m not going anywhere. Hell, right now, *I* don’t even have a job and I’m living with my mother.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said.

“We’ll get through this. It’s all going to work out for the best. Listen, I need to go. I’ve got to pick up mother from her hair appointment. How much longer are you going to be in here?” Kirk asked.

“Another day or so. The doctor thinks I should be ready to go soon.”

“Well I’ll come by tomorrow. I’ll bring you lunch. You want a Stromboli from Turoni’s?”

“I’d die for some Turoni’s”

“Grey.”

“What?”

“Don’t say the word die.”

“Oh. Sorry. I guess I better watch that.”

Kirk got up from my bedside and walked toward the door.

“Kirk,” I said.

He turned to look at me.

“Thanks for the roses,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” I said and watched him walk out the door. This time I knew he was coming back.

Chapter Twenty-Four

- Restaurant Revelation -

I was released from the hospital two days after Kirk showed up. I was given instructions to rest, take it easy, avoid lifting or climbing on anything, and most importantly to not fall and hit my head. My monthly checkups were scheduled with Doc Vonderbreak with a follow up appointment in six months with my neurosurgeon at Deaconess. I was happy to be at home and sleeping in my own bed. Kirk stayed with me. He took care of me. Mom had her hands full with Dad and the restaurant. A few weeks after I was home she cooked a family meal one night for all of us including Kirk. I suspected something was up. Mom never cooked. We always ate at the restaurant.

Dad was sitting at the head of the dining table with Mom at the other end. Cam sat across from Kirk and me. Eating in the dining room meant it must be big news.

“I spoke with Anna two days ago,” Dad said. “Your mother and I have done a lot of talking and soul searching. We’ve decided to sell the restaurant.”

No one spoke. Not a word was uttered. Dad’s words had erupted then began to settle, floating down like volcanic ash accumulating on the dining table.

“Are you serious?” I asked. *Had their talk about closing the restaurant become a reality?*

“Yes. Your father is serious,” Mom said. “We’ve looked at everything. This family has sacrificed too much for that restaurant. It has to stop. The accident was our wake-up call.”

Mom referred to my beating as ‘the accident.’ She couldn’t bring herself to say the word *beating* or even think of it in that term. I was not upset by their decision. Kirk remained quiet.

“Well it’s about time,” Cam said. He never had any interest in the business and avoided it at all cost. Growing up neither one of us was ever forced to work the business like Dad was.

“We, as a family, have a huge responsibility toward our employees. We have been made well aware of the community’s priorities, their loyalty. Our employees are the ones we must take care of. Your mother and I are cashing in our IRA’s and giving each of them one month’s severance pay. We’re shutting the place down.”

Shutting the place down? Shutting the restaurant down? After almost 60 years there would be no more Daniels’? I couldn’t imagine it not being in business, being a part of Ft. Sackville.

“Anna is going to contact that commercial broker in Indianapolis and enlist him to help her sell the property. This Sunday will be our last day in business. We’ve scheduled an employee meeting Sunday evening. We’re going to close early so we can speak with everyone. Nobody breathes a word until then.”

Dad didn’t want to give the employees advanced notice. He didn’t want anyone trying to change his mind. He would have the payroll checks cut and ready to hand out to each employee. One month’s pay, he thought, would be enough to hold them over until their unemployment kicked in. For the half dozen long-term staff he’d spoken with the director of food service at Ft. Sackville Community College, who happened to be a his second cousin, and found positions for them in the food court there. If they wanted to

work for the college they would get health insurance and some benefits –a perk for them since Daniels’ Family Buffet was never able to offer benefits to its employees. The Ft. Sackville Community College Food Court would be a better job. Mom and Dad had planned everything.

“So I guess this means I can go back to my teaching job?” I asked.

“Yes, Grey. I want you to go back to your teaching job. Miami Beach is where you belong,” Dad said.

I looked at Kirk. He sat motionless staring at his plate of food. I could tell he felt uncomfortable being a part of our conversation. He wouldn’t look at me.

“Kirk, you’re awful quiet,” I said.

“This is business between you and your family. Perhaps I should go back to your house and let you all finish talking,” Kirk said.

“Kirk, you’re a part of our family,” Mom said. “We want you here.”

Kirk looked up from his plate toward Mom.

“Mrs. Daniels, I...”

“Dessa, Kirk. You call me Dessa.”

“Dessa, I think the world of your family. And I am so happy that Grey is OK. But I think I need to go,” Kirk said.

“No. Don’t go,” I said, grabbing Kirk’s hand. “I want you to stay.”

I saw a small tear fall from Kirk’s eye.

“Kirk, I don’t know what exactly is going on now between you and Grey. But I do know this. You obviously care for one another a great deal and I can’t imagine what Dessa and I would have done these last few weeks had you not been here. I agree with

Dessa, you are just as much a part of this family as any of us. You don't need to go. I'd like for you to stay," Dad said.

I hadn't counted on my parents being so forthcoming in their expression of gratitude toward Kirk. I knew they like him, they always had. But I think something took root when they watched him care for me during my recovery. They said so out loud, right there at the dining room table.

"You both are so kind. Thank you," Kirk said looking at my Dad. "I guess I'm just a little nervous and frightened. I know Grey wants to go back to Miami Beach." Kirk looked me in the eyes, "I don't want you to leave."

"Go with me," I said. "You can. You have nothing holding you here. You can find a job in Miami Beach. We can go together. We can start over there," My excitement built as I realized the impact of my words.

"Are you serious, Grey?" Kirk asked."

"I've never been more serious in my life. I'm not going to stay here. I don't want to stay here. You don't want to stay in Indiana either. You've said so. We can go together. We can have the life that you want and that I want. We can have it together!"

The reality of not having the restaurant in my life, in my family's life for the first time began to take hold. None of us would ever be tethered to it again. After Sunday all of us would be free. Each of us could begin living the lives we wanted to. My Dad, for the first time since his father bought the Diner, would never have to do another day's work in the restaurant. I didn't know if I was happier for me or for him.

Kirk's mind was whirling. I could tell. He didn't speak. He kept looking into my eyes.

“OK.” Kirks excitement began to build, “OK. Yeah. Lets do it. Lets go!”

I leaned into him and wrapped my arms through his. We kissed right there at my parent’s dining room table.

“Oh, Jesus. Really? You guys can’t do that at your house?” Cam said.

“Cam, you leave them alone. They’ve been through a lot,” Mom said.

Kirk pulled from our kiss and my embrace. Smiling he said, “Yeah, Cam. We’ve been through a lot. And you better watch out or I’m going to come over there and give you a kiss.”

“I don’t take my brother’s sloppy seconds,” Cam said returning the smile.

“OK then. It’s settled. Your mother and I have an appointment with Anna tomorrow at 10:00am.

“But wait,” I said. “What are you and Mom going to do? Where will you go?”

“You don’t worry about your mother and me. We are going to start living our lives and enjoy whatever kind of retirement we end up with.” Dad looked at Cam, “And your brother is going to keep his ass in college, get a degree, and then a job.”

“I knew this would all come back around to me,” Cam said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

- Another U-Haul -

After the employee meeting on the last Sunday we were open, Dad posted a sign on the front door of the restaurant. It said:

It is with gratitude that the Daniels' family and employees of Daniels' Family Buffet offer our thanks for 58 wonderful years serving Ft. Sackville and the surrounding communities. Sunday, September 13, 2009 was our last day in business. Thank you for your patronage.

If anyone asks we've gone fishin'.

The next day Anna put the *For Sale* sign in the front yard of my Forrest Lane house and a week later a huge banner from Wissing Commercial Brokers was hung on the side of the restaurant. Without a doubt everyone in Ft. Sackville knew that the Daniels' family was no longer in the restaurant business.

No one called.

No one sent letters.

No one asked questions.

58 years died on the vine. Three local people were the exception: my hair stylist and friend Kevin and his mother Judy; and Mr. Mitchell who owned the local ambulance and moving company.

Two days after the Wissing Commercial Brokers For Sale sign went up at the restaurant Kevin and his mother Judy appeared at my parents' back door one evening bearing food. In Ft. Sackville the only time food was ever taken to someone's house was typically for a death in the family. Which, looking back, closing the restaurant was indeed a death in our family. Kevin and Judy brought a home baked and sliced honey glazed ham, green beans, and fresh tomatoes from her garden. Mom, Dad, Cam, Kirk and I were sitting at the kitchen table when Judy's face appeared on the other side of the kitchen's sliding glass doors along with Kevin's.

Judy's life had not been easy. Her family was one of the largest, most successful farm families in the county. But when Kevin came out to her and his family it had a price. Especially after he met Eric, fell in love, and the two opened up their salon. Turmoil became a frequent visitor in Judy's home, within her immediate family and among the community. On the frontlines of Main Street where Kevin and Eric's shop was located, in country churches, at picnics, or parades she fought others homophobia; she fought gossip; she fought hypocrisy. She reminded me of the hymn "Onward Christian Soldier" from my Sunday school days at Wabash Valley Baptist Church. That was Judy, a Christian soldier. Her policy was a simple life lived with a smile, kindness, and compassion for others. She understood what bigotry looked like along with avarice, greed, and the wrath of others. And how some folks used religion as a weapon, trying to veil their actions as goodwill and saving souls. So it was in her nature to show up at Mom and Dad's door bringing nourishment for *our* stomachs *our* souls. Her action and gift told us she cared.

Four days later Mr. Mitchell showed up on my front step.

Mr. Mitchell owned the ambulance that took me to Deaconess Hospital in Evansville as well as the local moving business and U-Haul franchise. He had been a successful business man most of his life. His was a life-long Ft. Sackville family. They did not live extravagantly. They had a comfortable home, nice cars, a swimming pool. They had worked hard for all of it. I am not certain about the particulars but he was charged with a felony related to his ambulance service, something about missing wallets or jewelry from those patients under his care while being transported to Mercy Memorial, but the charges were dropped. Many in Ft. Sackville however, had a hard time letting him move on. Mr. Mitchell and his family were regular customers at Daniels' Family Buffet.

Somehow Mr. Mitchell had gotten word that I was heading back the first of October to my teaching job in Miami Beach and when I answered my front door there on the other side of the glass storm door he stood. I opened the door and stepped out to greet him.

"I knocked on your Mom and Dad's door. They didn't answer. Are they home?" he asked.

"No. They're not. I don't know where they are." I said.

"Look. I don't know what's going on," Mr. Mitchell said. "I'm hearing all sorts of stories and you're really the one I need to speak with anyway."

"What's that?"

"Look. It's none of my business. But since your parents closed the restaurant I heard you're moving back to Miami Beach, to your teaching job,. Is that true?"

"Yes."

“When are you going?” He asked.

“Well, I plan to leave sometime around the first of October.” I paused. “I’m sorry Mr. Mitchell but with all due respect I don’t know what any of this has to do with you.” I had become suspicious of everyone in Ft. Sackville.

“Here’s the deal. Your family’s been good to my family over the years. You’ve always used us for moving restaurant equipment and such. Hell, your Dad’s ambulance trips to Mercy Memorial alone have kept my books in the black.” I giggled at Mr. Mitchell’s attempt at trying to be funny. It was true. It seemed for the last several years Mom was calling 911 every few months when Dad would have his “spells.”

“Listen, I want to help you out. You let me know when it is you want to load up and head back and I’ll have a truck here and my guys ready to work. Free of charge. All you’ll have to do is pay for the gas to get you back to Miami Beach and return the truck there.”

It hadn’t quite hit me that I’d be driving a U-Haul back to Miami Beach. At least this time Kirk would be with me.

“Mr. Mitchell, that is very kind. But really you don’t need to do that.”

“I insist. In fact I won’t take no for an answer. You just call the office once you have dates and we’ll do the rest.”

And with that Mr. Mitchell turned, stepped off my front porch and walked back to his pickup truck, got in and drove off.

Kirk walked up behind me. “Did I just hear what I think I heard?”

“Yeah, you did. Mitchell’s Movers are moving you and me to Miami Beach for free.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

- Goodbye Ft. Sackville, goodbye. -

Mr. Mitchell's guys packed the U-Haul in half a day. Most of my things were still in boxes. I had been in Ft. Sackville less than a year but it had seemed a lifetime. The plan was for Kirk and I to leave Sunday mid-morning after having breakfast with Mom, Dad, and Cam and then stop in Mt. Vernon to load his stuff and then begin our trek to Miami Beach. I had called my principal at Everglades High and asked her if I could return at the beginning of the second quarter, which began the third week of October. She was delighted and said yes. That gave Kirk and me two weeks to get settled in our new place at South Bay Club with its open-air lobby on West Avenue on Miami Beach. A colleague of mine owned a two bedroom on the top floor of the building and renovated it to resemble an industrial loft similar to those found in Manhattan. Kirk and I would finally have the life we both wanted.

After breakfast Kirk and I said goodbye to Mom, Dad, and Cam. "Do you want to drive through Ft. Sackville one more time and take one last look?" Kirk asked.

"You're joking, right?" I asked.

"No. I'm serious. I want to go by that old Chinese restaurant where you and I had our first date. I want to get a picture of us out front."

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Yes. I think you and I both know it's going to be a long time before you or I ever come back here. If we ever come back. I know a lot of bad shit has happened but a lot of

good stuff happened here too. It'd be kind of nice to have a picture of you and I out front to remind us of the good stuff that happened," Kirk said.

I drove the U-Haul through town to Second Street and parked it opposite the old China Palace. It'd gone out of business not long after Kirk and I had our date there and had been abandoned since. The sign was still hanging on the side of the building. Kirk took out his new iPhone and together we stood in front of the The China Palace while he did his best to position the phone to capture us in front of the sign. He took out picture. "There, you see," Kirk said, showing his phone screen. "When we're old and gray we won't remember that we took this picture of our first date fifteen years later."

I laughed. He was right. I was glad he insisted we take one last look.

We got back in the truck and headed toward Highway 41. On our way we passed Wabash Valley Baptist Church. Sunday service had just let out, it was a gorgeous October day and parishioners were gathering up and down the front steps and in front of the open sanctuary doors. Standing just outside the middle section of doors was Pastor Daryl shaking hands and receiving hugs from churchgoers as they filed out. I saw Mr. and Mrs. Thompson walking down the steps; Myrna Boil lumbered along behind them holding tight to the handrail, Daryl's wife Rebecca was at the base of the steps trying to corral Isaac and Jacob and a few other children running wild. Life had not skipped a beat for Wabash Valley Baptist Church. I saw folks there that for my entire life had been regular customers of the restaurant. I imagined their conversations. I knew how they spoke. I once listened to their talk in the restaurant. Perhaps the Ward family and the Cullen family, the small group gathered just beyond Pastor Daryl, were making plans with each other for Sunday dinner somewhere.

“Where are you all going?” Mr. Ward asks.

“I don’t know, we’re undecided,” Mr. Cullen says.

“What about that cute little café on Main Street?” Mrs. Cullen asks.

“Honey, they’re not open on Sunday, remember? We tried last week,” Mr. Cullen says.

“Well, we could go to Arbys?” Mr. Ward asks.

“I don’t want fast food,” Mrs. Ward says. “Applebee’s just opened south of Terre Haute. We could go there?”

“That’s an hours drive,” Mr. Cullen says.

“What other options do we have?” Mrs. Wards asks.

“I sure wish there was someplace a body could get some good ol’ home cooking,” Mr. Cullen says. “There just aren’t any decent restaurants in this town.”

No there aren’t, I thought. There’s nothing decent in this town.

“You’re awfully quiet, Kirk said.

Kirk shook me from the Ward’s and Cullen’s conversation in my mind.

“Oh, I was just thinking about our first date. Our picture,” I said.

I drove the U-Haul towards Highway 41, took the exit and headed south. Kirk and I were beginning our new life.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

- Miami Beach -

A year after Kirk and I moved into our West Avenue loft on Miami Beach overlooking Biscayne Bay and the Miami city skyline I got a phone call from Mom telling me that we were finally free of the restaurant.

Two weeks before Kirk and I left Ft. Sackville that October day Mom and Dad had signed the contract with Anna Benjamin and Hank Wissing to sell the property. Kirk and I worked diligently along with my brother Cameron and one of our long-time servers to clean up the restaurant since the building would be empty and unused and sell, its contents sold at auction. Mr. Wissing had told Dad no restaurant would be interested in a building so large. “The best staging would be to empty the place of everything,” he said. “Potential commercial buyers must be able to see an empty box. They want options for a 13,000 square foot building. No doubt they’ll want to subdivide it,” Hank said. “Just get it prepped with that idea in mind.” Anna agreed. So in those remaining weeks we cleared Daniels’ Family Buffet of everything: kitchen equipment, cooking utensils, stainless steel prep tables, pots and iron skillets, tables, chairs, the cash register, coffee makers, coffee cups, the green band Buffalo china used since I could remember. Personal items and pictures were temporarily stacked in the office. And it was alone in the office while taking a break that I began to flip through the picture frames that once hung on the wall near the restaurant’s exit now stacked in front of the filing cabinet drawers. I spotted one of my favorite. It was a picture of my family looking much younger and visibly giddy. My father’s hair was coal black, my mother looked rested and vibrant, my brother just a

toddler, and me much thinner, a full head of hair and a broad smile. We were sitting on the edge of a flat bed trailer; behind us the new 20x40 internally lit restaurant sign was strapped upright and in place on a flatbed trailer truck. After the picture was taken the sign company raised and secured the sign atop a 40-foot pole then connected the electricity. That first night the sign with its green background and yellow lettering announced that Daniels' Family Buffet would soon be open for business at its new Highway 41 location. It was the third incarnation since 1951 of my family's restaurant legacy in Ft. Sackville.

That August was sunny and warm, but not miserable like August can be in southern Indiana. Our restaurant was built on the highlands of the former Bonhomme Apple Orchard above the valley in which Ft. Sackville lay. And from my seat on the flatbed I could see the white Wabash Valley Baptist Church steeple, the four Gothic courthouse towers, and Sycamore trees along the Wabash River. My family's journey was long: planning, constructing, and supplying the new Daniels' Family Buffet. That day the sign was a cherry on top of our hard earned sundae.

We opened for business Labor Day weekend. The anticipation throughout Ft. Sackville was palpable and no one was more excited than my family and me. I remember the smell of that day, like hot asphalt, the exhaust of the crane lifting the sign. I watched as the welder's sparks fell to earth. His electric blue flame a star burning hot and bright.

Standing there in the restaurant's cluttered office I flipped through the other pictures. I saw Robbie and Daryl at the golf tournament; I saw the black and white framed photo of a very young Martha standing behind the lunch counter at the Diner

taking a customer's order; there was another in the Diner of me as a little boy sitting with Mom and Dad at my favorite table near the jukebox.

I heard the back kitchen door delivery bell ring. Brucken's Auction House trucks had arrived. My family's restaurant had become photographs in frames. Less than a year passed since I'd returned to help Mom take care of the restaurant but it seemed my presence made things worse. I'd let our employees down. I had failed. *It wasn't supposed to end this way.* I let the framed pictures slip from my hands with a soft thud and fall into place against the others. I walked out of the office, shutting the door behind me and headed toward the ringing delivery bell.

"Grey, are you listening to me?" Mom said over the phone, shaking me from my trance.

"Yeah, Yes. Of course," I said.

"No you're not. You haven't heard a word I said."

"I'm sorry, my mind was wandering," I said.

"I was trying to tell you that we aren't renewing the contract with Wissing Commercial and Anna. With real estate the way it is nobody's looking to invest in commercial property. We can't sell it."

Mom and Dad knew it'd be tough to sell the three acres of property and building – the 1.4 million dollar appraisal was big chunk of change. After closing the restaurant my parents had enough savings to get them through their first year of retirement and they made enough off the sale of fixtures and equipment to help Kirk and me get settled in Miami Beach plus get Cam off to Purdue University. But now the money had run out.

"We've spoken to a lawyer and have decided to declare bankruptcy," Mom said.

“What? Bankruptcy? Are you kidding?” I asked.

“No, Grey, I’m not. It’s our only option. Your Dad’s health isn’t getting any better and quite frankly we’re both tired.”

“How will that work? Won’t the bank take everything?”

“Yes. They will. The lawyer says we can work out a deal to keep one car and the house. Honestly though, your Dad and I told him we only want to keep one car. The bank can have everything else. Neither one of us can take care of this big house and I’d just as soon move into a small apartment on the outskirts of town and not have to maintain anything.”

“What does Dad say about all this?”

“He couldn’t be happier,” Mom said. “Your Dad has worked his ass off in that restaurant since he was twelve years old. I got my first job at fifteen at the drug store on Main Street in Hartwell. All of our lives we’ve done what we were supposed to do. We’ve payed more than our share into the system. I’m not the least bit ashamed of declaring bankruptcy. And besides, at this point it’s really our only option.”

“Wow. Ok. So when does all this begin?”

“We’ve already signed the papers. It’s not in our hands now. Our lawyer and the federal trustee take it from here. I just have to compile a list of all of our creditors.”

“Are you sure your Ok?” I asked.

“Yes, Grey your Dad and I are both fine. We’re actually going to look at apartments next week. We’ve hired Mr. Mitchell to help us move. I’m only keeping what I can fit into a two-bedroom apartment. I’m calling Brucken’s to come pick up the rest and sell it. Your Dad and I are downsizing and simplifying. It’s time to enjoy *our* lives.”

“Well then, I think it’s fantastic. Is Anna going to show you apartments?”

“I don’t know, Grey. Something odd is going on there. Word is that she and her husband are separated. Supposedly he kicked her out. She’s living at her bother’s house I’ve been told.”

“Really. I hadn’t heard anything. What about Blake?”

“He’s with his Dad. So that tells me that Anna’s done something.”

“I’m surprised Rosabelle hasn’t said anything to me about it over the phone.”

“Well, it seems kind of fishy. Apparently she’s been making lots of trips to Indianapolis. I suspect she got caught having an affair. And you know who with.”

“Seriously? Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” I asked.

“Well it seems the timing it right. She did go on and on about how sexy Hank Wissing was after we all met at the restaurant that day.”

“Holy shit.” I can’t believe it. It makes total sense. Had her husband done something she would have tossed his ass out and kept Blake, not the other way around. And come to think of it she did tell me she was making several trips to Indy for continuing education classes, some sort of real esate endorsement to sell commercial property. She even offered to pick me up at the Indy airport if ever I flew in to visit you and Dad. It all tracks back,” I said.

“It certainly appears that way,” Mom said.

“Wow. No wonder she’s been MIA. I haven’t talked to her since she sold my house. You know, I have to admit it’s so nice to be away from all that shit. It’s going to be a relief to finally be rid of the restaurant property and the community for that matter. I just never thought it would end this way.”

“Neither did I, Grey.” Mom said. “Anyway, on a happier note, what are you and Kirk up to? How’s school?”

“Everything is going well. Kirk’s actually thinking of returning to school at Florida International University and finishing his degree. He wants to go into architecture.”

“I think that’s fantastic,” Mom said. “Tell him I said he needs to go into a profession where he doesn’t have to rely on the public. If he can do that in architecture then by all means I say go for it.”

Mom and I spent over an hour on the phone. She sounded better than I’d heard her in years. A weight had been lifted. I knew that Dad felt the same way. For the first time in Dad’s life he was free from what his father had begun. My Dad would no longer suffer the sins of his father.

A few months after my parents declared bankruptcy they attended the court proceedings in Terre Haute to complete liquidation of their personal and business assets. To Mom and Dad’s surprise Anna Benjamin was in attendance with Hank Wissing. Since Wissing Commercial originally had the contract to sell the restaurant building and property, he’d contacted the bank upon learning of Mom and Dad’s decision to file bankruptcy and expressed his interest in purchasing the property. He wanted to subdivide it and build a strip mall. *Had Mom and Dad been set up?* Was Hank Wissing ever intent on selling the property or had sweet nothings been whispered to him by Anna about my family’s financial situation? Had he been told to sit tight, that he would eventually get the opportunity to purchase the million-dollar-plus property at half its appraised value?

That winter day in Terre Haute Mom and Dad walked out of the federal courtroom free from restaurant life forever. Anna Benjamin walked out of the courtroom with Hank Wissing –the new owner of my family’s former restaurant property.