

# Angels in the Choir

by

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## Chapter One

### CHILD IN THE CITY

The street seems so quiet and ordinary in the middle of a bright spring day. Nothing more than a long line of row houses marching away towards the city in the distance. There are hundreds of streets just like this one surrounding the great metropolis of Baltimore, the largest city in the state. But this street is special, not because it was named Church Street, but because of those who live here.

If it wasn't for the smog that so often accumulates as a by-product of the nearby chemical plant, the city skyline might be seen in the distance. But at night, when the sky is clear, a warm glow lights up the northern horizon. An inviting reminder of what lies across the wide span of the Patapsco River.

This is Curtis Bay, a small bit of land crisscrossed by a few dozen streets, a neighborhood much like any other. Here each row house seems to have its own shade of weathered brick, giving it some distinction from the adjoining neighbor. Each home joined to another, an economy of building technique that established a lifestyle.

Distinctive wide steps lead up to the front doors of the neighborhood. These great white slabs of Cockeysville marble were cut from quarries to the north and west a century before and are seen throughout the city. They have been kept clean over decades by the constant scrubbing of housewives and children, a ritual born of pride, and a lesson to be learned. Freshly painted iron railings gleam and the brightly cleaned stones line the sidewalks, all leading down to the Catholic Church on the corner.

And these people have much to be proud of, for sometimes hidden away at the rear is a delightful backyard, a mere token of greenery. Here and there a few twisted rose bushes and occasionally a lush lawn. A family place, for those Saturday afternoon cookouts or merely a yard for the tots to play, complete with a plastic kiddie pool. These are a tenacious people, privately clinging to their tiny plot of land and yet expressing their individuality of spirit for all to see.

A few cars are parked on the street, mostly older model, practical machines. Kids run and play in the street under the watchful eye of a grandmother, an aunt. A few of the children play in hand-me-down jeans, a T-shirt discarded by an older sibling. There are no designer clothes here. Life is too practical for that. But their clothes are mended and clean, a sign that someone cares.

A grocery stands on one corner, produce neatly arranged in small wooden boxes stacked up across the front. The small drugstore across the street sits next to a busy pizza parlor. The Tidy Laundromat adds the crisp smell of clean sheets with that of pepperoni cooking in the pizza ovens.

For years the homes have sheltered those who serve the industry of the greater metropolitan area. From the industrial plants in the east to the steel yards and docks of the south, the waterfront means an existence for thousands of families who settle here. They

have little money, but they are rich in the traditions of family and very much aware of their heritage.

The Mahoney family has lived here for over twenty years; long enough to raise three children and see two of them leave the community behind in search of their own destiny. The neighborhood has changed little in all that time, except that the homes seem to have grown older in sympathy with the people who live inside.

Brian had just recently celebrated his latest birthday as the youngest Mahoney. A card from his older sister Barbara in California had been her only remembrance of the occasion; his brother John didn't even bother to call this year. But he wasn't a child anymore and birthdays seemed to have less significance each year.

He had been a surprise baby, the pregnancy unplanned but understandable in a good Catholic family. The Mahoney's dedication to the Church gave them some distinction in this small community. Bill Mahoney was a member of the Knights of Columbus, a service order for devout Catholic men. And even Alice had her place, working the bingo tables on Wednesday evening and running the church socials on Saturday night

It was this sense of belonging that gave these people the incentive to survive. For amidst the poverty in this corner of the city, the Mahoney family seemed to be quite normal. Bill provided for his family on a modest salary. Their children certainly had wants, but their needs were solidly taken care of by these devoted parents.

Bill drove a late model Chevrolet and until last year, when John left for New York, the two men could be seen tinkering under the hood on just about any Saturday morning. It was a thing he shared with his oldest son, a time he now missed very much. The family had been a source of pride for both parents and now it was scattered to the wind.

John had grown up fast and independent, and yet he was mindful of his responsibilities as a child. Whereas many of his acquaintances had rebelled by becoming delinquents, this boy had buried himself in books. The wisdom of embracing education had come early to John. It was the way out and up from the numbing sameness that seemed to surround him.

So while his friends besotted themselves at the local bars or smoked weed in the vacant lots down by the waterfront, John studied with a vengeance. He soon became enamored with the art of photography. His photographs amazed both parents and teachers, but that wasn't enough. There was a wealth of opportunity in the streets of the city and John tried to capture each golden moment on film.

His senior picture in the yearbook from Francis Scott Key High revealed a handsome, serious-minded young man. But it was his grades and a wonderful portfolio that bought his ticket to the big city. John was now the youngest employee for a famous New York fashion magazine.

It didn't surprise his mother one bit when the boy announced he was leaving. Alice had always known she had gifted children. She had prayed for him to succeed and God had answered her prayers. It left her with no doubt that a little faith would accomplish whatever she desired.

Young Barbara Mahoney had been a shy girl until just after her sixteenth birthday. Her world suddenly changed when a friend talked her into auditioning for the school play. And from the moment she took the stage a change came over her. Mr. Lampas, the drama teacher, said it was like watching a rare flower bloom, and he immediately cast her as his Juliet.

Barbara had always wondered what it would be like to be someone else and acting provided a glimpse of that possibility. John's photographs of her in costume allowed everyone to see the transformation. And when that role was over she sought out another, and another. It wasn't long before she was one of the major players in the City Stage Company downtown, all before she was eighteen.

Bill and Alice were overwhelmed to see their little girl become a serious actress almost overnight. But the family attended every play, and Alice dutifully attended every audition. And in the summer after graduation, Barbara signed on with a touring company out of Los Angeles. Then she was gone.

Losing both older children in such a short span of time could have been devastating, except there was still their youngest to consider. And as the two eldest were now gone from the house, Bill and Alice felt like their youngest child should benefit from the added attention. Brian was young enough that it felt like they were starting over with a new family.

But Brian felt apart from the world around him. Losing first his brother and then his sister left him torn and confused. His brother had been kind and helpful, always taking him to the park and the movies on Saturdays.

And as little brothers often do, Brian idolized John; they were the best of friends. But Barbara was his confidant and he loved her best of all. He could still remember playing dress up with her on rainy afternoons when he was nine. She even allowed him to play with her fancy stage makeup. It had felt strangely thrilling to wear her girly clothes and paint his face with her cosmetics, but it had also been their little secret. Brian would miss her the most.

For only Barbara knew the secret and she would never tell. She was the only one he had ever told. Brian was only twelve years of age when he told her about it. He said he was still a virgin, and she replied that wasn't at all unusual. But Brian said he had plans to change all that, because...because he wanted to lose that virginity to a man.

Brian couldn't begin to imagine who besides his sister would be able to understand this little secret. And even then she stared at him in silence for a very long time before embracing him and telling him it was all right to be different.

He knew it would be devastating if anyone found out about these thoughts. And from prior experience, he understood his parents were against discussing anything overtly sexual.

"Dad, where do babies come from?" That question back in fourth grade had earned him a thin booklet by a Church group about abstinence thru prayer, but otherwise... silence. Sex wasn't one of the allowable topics in a strictly Catholic family.

His older brother, John, had gone through puberty when Brian was just starting school. And when puberty finally knocked on Brian's door he was gone. Barbara had seemed to sense something in her little brother and coaxed Brian into telling her about those feelings. But although she could tell him the facts of life she had no idea what sex with a man would be like. And then like a whirlwind she too was gone from the house.

In response to the quandary in those formative years, Brian made up his own answers. These tidbits of information were delivered by his imaginary friend, Benny, who had the strangest outlook on life but all the answers a boy could ever want. Benny had become a necessity once Brian started school. For it was there that the physical difference between boys and girls became a major topic of daily conversation.

The crude message he received was that only girls had vaginas but that men could take it up the butt. They were called faggots when they did that, a less than endearing term and the object of great derision amongst his peers.

Brian's internal struggle wasn't solved by this information and he blamed Benny for not telling him sooner. He didn't want to be a faggot, who would? They argued about the point for days until Brian's mother asked who he was talking to.

This was only one of several occasions when Brian had been caught talking to himself while conversing with Benny. And as always he denied talking to anyone. It made him think about that part in the Bible where Saint Peter denies he has anything to do with Jesus.

He could understand that, nobody in his neighborhood talked to the cops either, it wasn't their way. And sometimes your closest friends can be an embarrassment or create fear, much like what happened with Saint Pete. But Brian figured that all had been forgiven up there in heaven. After all, Pete wouldn't have been given the doorman's job at the Pearly Gates unless Jesus still loved him.

There was probably nothing wrong with having Benny as his best friend and most of the time Brian knew he wasn't real. But when he was feeling bad about himself or some crazy thought started running through his head, it was Benny that set him right again.

But it wasn't like the sex topic was about to go away either, and in direct proportion to the number of erections that were occurring by the time he was eleven, Brian embarked upon a course of independent study with his body. And as he reached his thirteenth year the dilemma was finally solved. He discovered what the term orgasm means...Damn.

When a boy is in the throes of puberty there isn't much else happening that seems as vital. The events and people in his life had a profound effect on Brian prior to the big event. And he decided that from all he'd learned that his virginity still seemed to be a major roadblock, it had to go.

Certain feelings grow inside a young person, especially the ones most Catholic parents try to keep bottled up whenever possible. But Brian was confronted with a reality of himself that was pretty scary. He knew the word for it by then, he was homosexual.

The bathroom mirror reflected a pleasant face, his father's brown curly hair and his mother's green eyes, but that was only the outside. The image he saw spoke only to his Irish heritage. No matter how he looked, Brian understood that inside he wasn't thinking or feeling the same way as other boys his age.

The image he had of homosexuals wasn't an ideal in any sense of the imagination. Could someone tell by looking at him that he was? He dressed like all of his friends, although there were few hand-me-downs in his wardrobe. Brian was careful with his things because he knew they had cost his parents a lot of money.

He played with the other boys, although kicking a ball in the street was about the limit of his sports activity. But they ran in the park, playing tag in the twilight under the trees, and Brian found it easy to make friends.

But none of these other children around him expressed anything close to what he was thinking. And having his thoughts muted in such a fashion seemed to mean that he was never going to find out if he really was homosexual. He couldn't be a faggot, could he? And then life gave him the answer in a rather cruel way.

Margaret Young was probably the prettiest girl in Brian's fifth grade class. But she was also a source of great distress because he didn't feel 'that way' about her like the other boys. Her game was good. Batting those long eyelashes with this pleading look in her baby blue eyes, she seemed to get whatever it was she wanted. It seemed as if every boy in school would gratefully fall on a sharpened number two pencil if she asked them to...every boy except Brian.

And for this reason he seemed doomed to be her special project. Margaret gave him a Christmas card every year, showered him with Valentine cards and used any other excuse she could think of to capture his attention. Brian was painfully aware of what she was doing, but also knew he was helpless to stop it.

Her final act was to confront him one afternoon in the coat closet. A moment she chose because they were quite alone in the little space at the back of their classroom. She just walked up and pushed her budding breasts in his face, pinning him to the wall. Brian blushed and then froze as she grabbed a handful of his crotch, the very sensitive part that held his marbles. And ever so slowly she began to squeeze.

"You don't like me, do you? Why is it that you ignore me so much? Is it because you're queer, Brian Mahoney? Are you a God-damned faggot?"

"No...no," he stammered.

He was trapped and no amount of squirming would allow him to escape, instead his squirming made her squeeze his precious sack of marbles.

"Then get down on your knees and kiss me there," she said. With that she pulled up her skirt and revealed she wasn't wearing any underwear today.

Now any other boy in that school might have been drooling for the sight of Margaret's sex. Several would have crawled across broken glass just to get her scent. But even as his marbles felt the painful crush of her hand, Brian understood that he would rather die than smell her down there.

"Faggot...FAGGOT," she yelled in his face and her hand squeezed him into blinding pain and then a merciful oblivion as he passed out.

Brian was left huddled in the corner, his marbles aching something fierce. He couldn't stand and yet outside the bus was leaving. The anxiety of the moment swept over him, the word still echoed in his head. 'Faggot.' Brian turned his head and vomited on the floor. And that is how the school janitor found him an hour later. Showing concern, the man graciously drove him home without asking any questions.

It could have been the start of a very awkward time for Brian except that Margaret left their school shortly after that incident. It seems her mother discovered their father had been molesting her and her younger sister since they were little. The cops were called and the bastard was promptly carted off to jail where he belonged. The neighborhood buzzed with gossip about those poor little girls. Brian was the only boy in school with a smile on his face.

Brian's mother read all about it in the Sun Times and asked if he knew her.

"Wasn't she that pretty little girl in your class?"

"No, Mom, I don't know her at all," he lied. Saint Peter would have understood.

But Margaret was right, and Brian was just beginning to understand how hard being a homosexual was going to make his life. Maybe if he had grown up a child of privilege within a wealthy family then things would have been different. But he grew up in the Bay

with the rest of his family and friends. Here there was a proscribed fate for little faggot boys.

Feeling like a total sham, Brian often cried when he was alone at night. And he prayed for a change in his thoughts. For like all good little Catholic boys, he had been taught that God was the source of all things.

"Why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this?"

But there was no answer, just the certainty of those feelings, the ones that left him trembling in the dark. It was times like these when Benny might have given him unconditional love, but by then Brian had grown out of that stage.

The birthdays came and went...twelve, thirteen, fourteen...and Brian still prayed for an answer. It felt like he was living with one foot in heaven and the other in hell. The Church led him to believe that it was a mortal sin for him to be a homo. He would be condemned for wanting to do the things homosexuals did. But his body responded more and more to the thoughts of naked boys and what they might do together. Sin had never seemed like so much fun.

And over the years one of his classmates became a particular focus of these thoughts. The boy was both popular and good looking, ideals that Brian felt lacking in himself. But they had grown up around one another and that seemed to be a consideration in any friendship.

Sean Williams was a tough little character, a product of his parents and the Bay culture in which they lived. Brian had witnessed the boy in several fights and yet Sean never took advantage of an opponent when he fell. There was a balance of fairness in their dealings. To his amazement the boy seemed willing to be his friend. It was the beginning of a new chapter, and Brian hoped this one would serve him well.

It was a shock when Sean decided one day that he wanted to learn about kissing by practicing with Brian. He couldn't have asked for a more willing partner, but he had no idea what lay beneath that acceptance.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?"

Sean's question came as they sat in Brian's room one Saturday afternoon in early summer. It was hot inside and both of them had removed their shirts. The slight breeze from the overhead fan moved the boy's fine blonde hair in such a way that Brian had become mesmerized at the image it conjured up in his head. He still couldn't believe that Sean had accepted the invitation to spend the day listening to records.

"Did you hear me?" Sean asked.

"Yeah...I don't think I've kissed any girls," Brian replied.

"Don't think? Oh, your mother and relatives don't count. I was thinking about Jennifer Tompkins."

"The one in Mrs. Taylor's class? She's cute," Brian said.

"Damn right."

"Have you kissed her?"

"Uh, no. Come on Brian, I've never kissed a girl. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You put your lips against hers and zap, you're kissed," Brian said.

"But what if I do it wrong?" Sean said. "She would tell everyone that I'm a bad kisser."

"For real? How hard can it be?"

"Well, you sure don't know either," Sean said with a laugh. And then he got a strange look in his eyes and he smiled. "If I kissed you, would you know if it was any good?"

Brian was astonished, had he heard correctly? "Kiss...me? Uh, I suppose I would know if it was good or bad, how do you tell?"

"Like in the movies. They kiss and the girl gets all into it, she kisses back. It must be a real turn on. I'm getting stiff just thinking about it."

Sean's admission brought a moment of intimacy that seemed to grow between them. Brian looked into Sean's eyes and saw only curiosity looking back at him. He closed his eyes and puckered his lips. The moment their lips touched Brian was a goner.

It lasted only a moment until Brian heard a sigh.

"How was it?" Sean asked.

"Good...but is that all there is to it? Kissing always seemed more like...isn't there more that's supposed to be happening?"

Sean thought a moment and then smiled. "Let me try again."

By the third kiss Brian felt like he was going to faint. Sean had his hands on Brian's neck, and his tongue went exploring. The passion seemed to sweep through the both of them as hands grasped and they hugged. The last kiss ended with a gasp from the both of them.

"How was that?" Sean asked.

"Awesome," Brian replied.

"Let's try it lying down," Sean suggested.

To be on the safe side, Brian locked his bedroom door.

"Uh...no funny stuff," Sean said and Brian nodded.

Lying beside one another meant the boys would be touching and Brian worried about what might transpire. Thank God he was wearing his long shorts. But grasping hands became clutching hugs which brought their bodies together in a most natural way. The kissing became more physical as Sean rolled himself on top, his aggression poking into Brian's belly. And Brian could feel their mutual arousal as Sean began to rub back and forth.

Brian hugged with delight as he felt Sean push against him. The act had gone way beyond kissing practice. He was being treated like a girl and Sean couldn't know of the excitement this was creating. Lost in the overwhelming feelings, Sean continued to rub and kiss until the act became overwhelmingly sexual.

Sean rolled off and stood up. "I...I'm sorry, that went too far."

Brian had been waiting for it to end; quite sure that Sean would be embarrassed by what had happened. He knew what to say.

"Jennifer is in big trouble if you get to use that on her," he said.

"Oh?"

"It was powerful...I loved it."

"Really? I thought it went too fast. I mean, I got carried away," Sean said. He was blushing now. "I almost busted a nut."

"Like that would have killed me. How else are we gonna find out how it works?" Brian said.

And that was the argument which finally eased the situation. For if Sean thought only of Jennifer, Brian was well grounded in knowing that the boy had just brought sex into their relationship. He too had been so very close to an orgasm.

"Yeah...I guess. You're not mad at me?" Sean asked.

"No, it was amazing."

And it turned out to be one of the things they shared again and again as the weeks went by. Sean would allow it to happen, saying it was good practice for when they started dating girls. That made sense for him, but Brian had no plans to use what he was learning on a girl.

Whatever Sean wanted to tell himself was happening between them, Brian wasn't going to argue. And almost every time they practiced, Sean would end it by excusing himself and using the bathroom.

Brian knew the boy was masturbating in there. Their state of arousal seemed to dictate that was a necessity. But Brian was not going to relieve himself in order to make the feelings go away. Although he did have to change his underwear on several occasions when control eluded him, he didn't want Sean to think he was masturbating at all.

But then came the day when Sean was overwhelmed with guilt and he lashed out. Brian was stunned by the sudden punch from his friend, but more so that he was blamed for what they had been doing. What was he doing wrong? Had it gone too far?

The horror of that moment brought back the memory of Margaret. Deep down he knew Sean had been kidding himself, their activity becoming a source of real frustration. They had begun fondling one another, the urge to kiss and masturbate overwhelming them both. But it had been the end of innocence between them. Sean walked away mad and Brian retreated inside himself.

There were probably very few gay boys in Curtis Bay as Brian was growing into this self-awareness. And if there were, he was sure the smart ones would have fled immediately after discovering themselves. This part of the city had a reputation of eating people whole and then spitting out the parts if they didn't fit in.

From the soot stained businesses up on Patapsco Avenue to the garbage-laden waters of the Back Bay over at the Coast Guard station, this little community was considered one of the toughest around. But if the city made the residents of the Bay hunker down under the pressure, it also made them closer together as neighbors.

The advent of summer also seemed to bring another sort of creature into the southern neighborhoods. Because a boy had little enough to do when school was out except wander the streets or play street-ball, these men seemed to gravitate here. Every boy knew what they came to find, it was hardly a well kept secret.

Brian couldn't walk down to the corner store this time of year without some guy driving slowly past and waving a twenty dollar bill through the window of his car. But he was startled every time it happened. These men were after him and he was repulsed by it. It didn't seem possible, but they were after the same thing he was.

Even the offer of money for sex didn't give him the courage to acknowledge the invitation. There were stories about what could happen to a young boy in the clutches of these guys. Although twenty dollars was a whole lot of money to a fourteen year old, he didn't dare consider earning it.

But he knew boys who did take the money, allowing themselves to be spirited away to a secluded spot where despicable things took place. Even if a boy left the main streets,

ducking into an alley for the pickup, how could they do it in front of the whole neighborhood? Caught between curiosity and fear, Brian chose the latter. There would come a time when he realized the wisdom of that choice.

All these events unfolded in his life long before being a gay person was acceptable to his way of thinking. He needed to understand so many things but he didn't know any responsible gay people at the moment. It might have helped if he knew a gay man, but over time Brian began to realize he wanted to.