

## Chapter Six

### CONVERSATION WITH AN ANGEL

It was bound to happen and Brian just wasn't prepared for it when it did. For the longest time he had wanted to sing solo in front of the choir, it had been his dream. But that was back when he had the crush on Gabriel and his example as a guide. So when Father Dominic asked him to sing a solo for the Christmas Eve mass he balked.

The very thought of standing in the place where Gabe's sweet voice had sung the year before seemed almost too much to bear. In fact it brought back all the sadness Brian had pushed aside the past six months. He had a fear that when his mouth opened to sing he would choke and probably cry. It would not be fair to the choir, even if they understood.

"I can't do it, Father...I can't."

His eyes said that he understood but his demeanor said that there was a tradition to uphold.

"You were his friend, Brian. Won't you do it for him?"

"I'm not half the singer he was...please, don't ask me to do this."

"You're the best voice we have for the solo, doesn't that count for something? The others will right there with you and I know your parents will be so proud."

Dominic had him there, his parents would be overjoyed. Especially after the fiasco when his mother came to see him at boxing practice. She had almost fainted when Sean got past his guard and drew first blood. Brian had lost focus on the match for only a second, allowing himself to be distracted by his parents sitting ringside. His mother had been so upset she wanted to pull him from the team. Only his father's sensibility at the moment saved Brian the embarrassment.

How could he tell Dominic that Gabe's ghost still stood beside him when he sang? As Benny before him, Gabe was always in his mind...his imagination. The boy was there to judge him, Brian knew that. But what could he do...who could he tell?

"You think about it, Brian...but I will need an answer by next week."

"Yes, Father."

They never had that talk Dominic alluded to after Gabe's death. Brian had enjoyed the man's concern and attention since the funeral, but he never felt like he wanted to get that close. Dominic had dealt with the sadness alone, throwing himself into activities that involved the youth of the church. Brian had even seen the results at the Teen Club when Dominic finally took it over. The dances were now relevant to the kids and many more of them attended, but not Brian.

He thought about talking to Pat, but then the man had not been home the last several times Brian had knocked. And taking the matter into the confessional seemed irrational. How could he talk to a priest about his feelings?

It finally occurred to him that Mr. Hanson was the most likely person. Brian trusted him to do what was best. The bond between coach and boxer had been one of the most important achievements in his young life. It was worth a try.

Since he had been concealing the relationship with Sean all along, there was less chance that Brian might reveal his true feelings about Gabe. But if he thought Hanson wasn't the brightest bulb when it came to things of this nature he was wrong. Hanson saw right through the smokescreen.

Sitting in his office, Brian had begun by telling Hanson of his work with the choir and leading to the admiration he had for Gabe and the circumstances of his death. Hanson sat impassive and yet attentive, his eyes showing concern and then sadness.

"And the boxing took me away from the crazy thoughts in my head, I thought he was finally gone from me," Brian said. "But sometimes I hear his voice when the choir sings, as if his ghost still haunts the choir loft."

"You loved him, didn't you, Brian?"

Loved? Loved, how did he mean that? Would he accept the admission?

"Yes, Coach...I loved him. He was the best thing I had in my life and then...if I had only known."

"You can never know another person entirely, Brian. If he had planned suicide for a while then he might have given someone a chance to find out and stop it. There were probably no clues you could have acted upon that would have made any difference. It sounds like it was an impulse based upon his fear of retaliation from the other boys. And I gather that he was gay."

"Gay...I never..."

"Brian, please, I know who you are. I've seen it before. Your loss was made even harder by the love you shared."

"I...I don't know what to say," Brian stammered.

"Ok, just don't get defensive. Who would I be to judge you based only upon someone that you loved? God made us all equally, and His judgment is the only final truth we all face."

"Gabriel is an angel now," Brian blurted out. "God forgave his sins and made him an angel, I just know it."

"And what of your sins, Brian? Do you feel that being gay makes you a sinner?"

"The Church says I am...but I don't believe that."

"So we have several conflicts working here, do you realize that?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Brian said. And just saying that made him understand how true it was. Yes, he didn't know what to think about the Church anymore.

"I'm glad you came to me with this, it shows how important these feelings are to you. I know you want some answers. And fortunately I know someone that can help you, someone that will let you talk about anything you feel in your heart."

"This person taught me what it means to be compassionate and caring. I care a great deal about you, Brian. Every boy on the team is important to me. But I believe you need to come to terms with these feelings before they get in the way for the rest of your life."

"Who is it?" Brian asked.

"His name is John Martin. He's a psychology professor for a private school up in the city. He charges those kid's parents big money because they can afford it. But he's a friend of mine and he won't charge you a nickel for some good advice."

Brian looked down at his hands. They looked so strong and yet inside he felt so weak. But his Coach hadn't steered him wrong yet, this was advice he should take. Could he do it? Was it possible to tell a total stranger what he felt inside?

Hanson smiled. "Brian, look at me. It took a lot of courage for you to come here and talk to me about this. But I see courage in you every time you step up in the ring. Don't let the issue of being different defeat you."

"If you think it will work...I'll do it."

"Good, I'll get him down here next Saturday for practice and introduce you. In the mean time, I wouldn't say anything to your other friends about this. Some things are best when they are private matters. I won't contend with any foolishness from the others towards you."

"Thanks, Mr. Hanson," Brian said.

"Being a good coach gives me a lot of responsibility, you know that? You aren't the only one on the team with problems, but you are unique. I like that about you. Now go tell Father Dominic that you will sing at Christmas. I might just come and hear you."

"Would you? That would be great."

Hanson didn't expect the hug Brian gave him. But the boy's affection touched him. He placed his large hands around Brian and squeezed back. To Brian it was different than the hugs he gave his parents or Pat or even Sean. This man had control of his life because he had given of himself willingly. Hanson had punished his body and made him strong, but that hug spoke of genuine love.

And John Martin was just the opposite of Coach Hanson. Brian couldn't imagine how the two of them had become friends. The guy looked old enough to be Brian's grandfather, but maybe that image was fostered by the gray beard and bushy eyebrows. Hanson had told all the boys that a man was judged by his strengths. But maybe Brian squeezed a bit too hard when they shook hands just to make an impression.

"John, this is Brian Mahoney," Hanson said by way of introduction. "Brian, Professor Martin."

"Oh, let's not start by calling me professor, ok? Brian, you may call me John if you like."

"John. I like that," Brian said.

"Well, you go about your business and then we'll talk after the practice. I haven't had the chance to see what Claude has created here."

"We have nine of the original team members and six new ones this year," Brian said. "And

pretty soon Mr. Hanson is going to let us box against another junior team."

"Is that exciting? It looks like you have quite a nice setup here," John said.

Hanson smiled as Brian led John around the garage and explained the exercises, the bag work and the nature of sparring in the ring. The boy didn't know what it meant to be a professor but he soon learned that John's mind absorbed a great deal of information.

The gentleman sat on a bench and watched Brian go through his bag exercises and then take a turn in the ring. Hanson had again paired him up with Mark instead of Sean. And Mark was still the hot-headed brat that didn't like getting punched. Only now Brian knew better than to turn his back on the kid.

They actually lasted two whole rounds this time before Mark tried a cheap shot below the waistband of Brian's shorts. The blow was parried with a quick left back-hand and it hit Brian in the thigh, but it was enough to make him retaliate.

The return blow, when it came, was a complete surprise to Mark, following as it did behind a simple one-two series to the stomach. He was so predictable by then, and Mark's gloves dropped to cover his mid-section. Brian's right arm went back and the force of his shot to the chin almost lifted Mark off the ground.

He went down in a heap and Brian immediately knew the boy was out. Hanson had said there would be no knockout blows during practice but it had just been too easy. Mr.

Wayne knelt beside Mark and then looked at Brian dancing in the corner where he had retreated.

"He is sure gonna have a sore jaw...you popped him mighty hard," Wayne said with a grin. "Payback is a bitch."

"And that will be about enough of that," Hanson said from ringside.

Uh oh, Brian thought, now comes the lecture. But the coach seemed more concerned about helping Mark to his feet. The boy still looked like he couldn't focus enough to walk a straight line. Brian climbed down out of the ring and Sean was right there waiting.

"Teach him to stop those cheap shots, didn't ya?" Sean said, putting an arm on Brian's shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

"But I didn't hit him that hard," Brian protested.

"I know...you've hit me harder. He must have a weak chin. But it looked so cool. Bam...thud, he was out like a light. Way to go...killer. Yeah, Killer Brian."

Brian knew he would remember that instant for a long time. It was the moment Sean gave him the nickname that was to follow along for years. Killer B...well, he knew it could have been worse.

And suddenly he remembered that John was watching and turned to look at the man. He was sitting there a few feet away watching the interaction with Sean. Somehow Brian understood from the look on John's face that he was seeing the boys together. It could have been an awkward moment if Sean had known, but instead it made Brian happy that someone finally knew.

The Greater Chesapeake Bay gave them a welcome respite from the bluster of winter that afternoon as John and Brian walked over to the Hardee's restaurant for an introductory chat. He was a fussy guy, Brian remembered thinking. John fumbled with a handful of dollar bills in his pocket as he paid the lady for the fries and a juice Brian asked for. But John drank only black coffee, the first of many cups Brian would see him consume.

They sat in a corner booth, the slick orange and tan vinyl of the bench seats creaking as they slid in place. John slurped the awful smelling brew and made a face.

"Smells better than it tastes, I'm afraid."

"Coffee is good with cream and sugar," Brian ventured. "My Mom lets me have it sometimes."

"Makes you feel grown up, doesn't it?" John said.

"Yeah...how'd you know?"

"We may be different ages but I was a kid once too, always remember that. Even if you feel like you are so different from those around you there are always things we share in common."

"I guess Mr. Hanson told you about me...about what I feel like..."

"Yes, but I want to hear it from you, Brian. Do you mind?" John asked.

Brian looked into John's eyes and saw concern and...something else. Yes, it was a challenge. He had seen the same look in Sean's eyes when they fought. But this wasn't a struggle, this was a need to understand how he felt and so Brian began by talking about Benny and his thoughts as a child.

John was such a good listener that the fries had gone cold before Brian realized he hadn't taken a bite. And they were still in the little wax bag when Brian told about

meeting Gabe and the feeling that his was the voice of an angel. John smiled when he was told of the first kiss and stroked his beard when Brian related their first sexual encounter in the school basement.

Brian didn't seem at all uncomfortable talking about these things, it seemed like he just had to tell John everything. The man even nodded when Brian described those last few hours on the rooftop and the physical love he shared with Gabe.

But tears flowed down Brian's cheeks when he described the death of love and the ghost that still haunted him. John's mouth was clamped shut and Brian could almost feel the man shared in the painful memories.

And then he became embarrassed, realizing that he had been talking for almost an hour. He quickly rushed through the friendship with Sean until there was silence hanging in the air between them. And only then did John smile.

"That was very good, Brian. Is there anything you want to add?"

"I don't think I can sing the solo at Christmas. It was Gabe's place and I would feel like I was standing on his grave."

"Death is probably the hardest thing to accept when you are growing up, but it's a reality of life. Like your director, Father Dominic, you said? Like Dominic, I think that you need to sing this solo. Not because it will bring up sad feelings but because it is the fulfillment of your dreams and that is always more important.

"It isn't like you will ever take Gabriel's place, Brian, he was his own person. But it is time that you shared in the glory, as he did, and go on with your life. Cry if you must but then it would be better if you would see yourself as singing a tribute to life. Had he lived I'm sure Gabe would have enjoyed hearing you sing the solo. Love is about sharing things and not being afraid to try something new to make the relationship better."

"But if I do cry it will make me look bad...you know, weak," Brian said.

"And maybe a little gay, is that your concern?"

"Yeah, something like that. Doesn't it bother you that I'm...I'm gay?"

"Bother me, no. Worry me that you cannot accept yourself for the bright talented boy that you are, yes. At your age what does it mean anyway? Sure, you won't date girls and someday that will become obvious to others and they will question your sexual feelings because of it. But you are sixteen, right? I'm surprised you haven't felt these pressures before.

"Right now you are under the care of your parents and the first choice you will have to make about being gay is when you plan to tell them about it."

"No way, they would hate me," Brian said.

"Maybe not, parents are pretty observant. They might already understand who you are but just don't see enough of the clues to form that thought. It will take a lot of courage on your part to tell them, but from what I saw today in the boxing ring you are developing courage at a rapid pace."

"But why do they have to know at all?" Brian asked.

"Probably because you love them, although that sounds simple, it's true. And you already know how complicated love can make you feel. But one step at a time, you don't have to face that issue at the moment. The Gabe thing is more important, you need to put that ghost to rest."

"But I still don't understand...well maybe I do, everyone knew about him. It just seems like he gave up."

"And you won't," John said. "You aren't a quitter, Brian. If that was true then you wouldn't have found the courage to face up to the feelings you have for Sean."

"Sean is different," Brian said.

"Yes, you learned something about love and took a different direction. Your relationship with Gabe was about fantasy and adoration. Sean looks to be a more realistic situation, something you can handle."

"I mean Sean is different because we don't do all the stuff I did with Gabe. I don't think Sean would understand and I can't push him to do things he won't like."

John smiled. "And that is why it is real. Love is give and take. You finally understand that with Sean. Would it shock you if Sean turns out not to be gay as he grows older?"

"Why, you think he isn't?"

"I think you're both pretty young to make that decision, except for the things you've told me about yourself. Sean, on the other hand, may just be experimenting and you are pressing your ideal on the feelings you have for him. Has he ever said he was?"

"No," Brian said and he felt the tears burning as they returned to his eyes.

"Then enjoy what you have now. You have these expectations of those you love and they won't always work out. Sean is a bright kid, and he probably has you figured out already. The fact that he shares a special kind of love with you means he cares for you a great deal. Just be aware that things might change for him in the future. It won't be a rejection of you as a person, just a realization that he can't be what you want him to be."

"Am I going to lose everyone I love?" Brian asked. He felt a tear roll down his cheek and brushed it away with the back of his hand.

"No, I'm not saying that at all. Sean will always love you, Brian. He seems like a friend you'll have your whole life. And I could be wrong. He might be gay after all. But as I said, enjoy your life now. You only get one childhood and these are the times you'll look back on with wonder as you grow older."

Brian forced a smile. John was right and he knew it. But it was times like this when he felt mad at himself for being so weak and unsure of his feelings.

"Thanks for putting up with me," Brian said. "I didn't mean to cry."

"No shame in letting out a few tears," John said. "It isn't a weakness, it's therapeutic. Makes you feel better."

"Yeah, I guess. I'm sorry...I didn't eat the fries you bought me."

"They might spoil your dinner anyway," John chuckled. "Maybe you'll be hungry next time."

"You want to do this again?" Brian asked.

"Sure, it was good for us both I think. I learned something today, didn't you?"

"Yes...yes, I did."

"Now tomorrow you tell Father Dominic that you will sing for the Christmas Mass. I believe that Claude and I will be there just to hear you sing. I haven't been in a church for years and if you can get an old sinner like me to attend...well, that will be nothing short of a miracle."

"But I still don't know what the Church will do when they find out about me," Brian said.

"Yeah, that's a tough one." John said. "We'll just have to cross that bridge when we get to it, won't we?"

"Beats swimming," Brian said.

And John laughed. His words had been a comfort, and that is what Brian really needed, someone to validate his point of view.

In time Brian learned that John was more than a professor, he was a scholar. He had two married daughters and six grandchildren. In between all that he'd written several dozen books. With him in the family Brian imagined they would be well adjusted kids too. His wife had died four years before after thirty-two years of putting up with his shenanigans, his words, not Brian's. This work on the side, and Brian guessed this is the part where he came in, had taken her place.

But Brian was sure his parents would not understand their little talks at the Hardee's so he kept it to himself. Having John as a resource for the answers to life's most difficult questions was to improve his attitude immensely. The man was like Santa Claus in a rumpled suit and tie, the bringer of joy to Brian's heart and mind. No, he didn't really believe in a Santa Claus but maybe, just maybe, John would change his mind.

On his knees that night, Brian prayed for his parents and friends. Sean was on the list and he asked God to please let them remain close friends no matter how things turned out. He also asked God to please tell Gabe that he was going to sing the solo for Christmas. Maybe if the boy heard it from the Big Guy himself he wouldn't haunt Brian's thoughts so much and spoil the joy of singing.

And before Brian crossed himself at the end of the prayer, he asked God to include his new friend John in the blessings. For the first time in a long while he felt free of fear and doubt. Somehow that conversation had opened a window and Brian felt like a blast of fresh air had swept out the emotional baggage he had been carrying for months.

"Yes, God, please bless and protect John Martin," Brian prayed. For if God did put angels on earth to look after his children as it said in the Bible, then John was now his chosen angel.