

Chapter Seven

ALMOST HEAVEN

If Brian had been full of himself then he might have thought that Saint B's was filled to overflowing because he was singing in the mass, but it happened every year. Not that he would ever think such a horrid thought. It was frightening to see all those people.

Despite six weeks of practice, Brian was afraid that he would slip up and sing a wrong note. In a solo there is no place to hide a mistake like you can when you're in the choir. He'd made small errors in the past while singing with the others. Easiest thing to do then was to just shut up and let them take the lead, but not now. Solo means alone, and he felt the weight of that responsibility now.

Fortunately all the boys looked alike in their red Christmas choir robes, wandering through the crowd making their way into the church. Brian had warmed up with the choir in the practice room over at the school but now he was looking for his parents before the mass began. Looking for assurance, that's what John would have said.

The things John said had been on his mind a lot since they had started a regular Saturday meeting after practice. And they talked about everything too, from boxing to school, to what Brian wanted to be when he grew up. John said he thought Brian was such a fireball that he might just write a book about their experiences together. Brian had laughed, who would want to read about that?

Sean had given him a black eye the week before, but the reddish-purple bruise around his eye was almost gone by now. Hanson had continuously warned them about the shadow boxing outside practice and he was right. When it was gone, Brian wouldn't be able to make Sean feel guilty anymore.

"Brian...hello, good to see you." The voice had come from behind and he turned to find Pat standing there with the obligatory Sam at his side. They were a pair now and the whole neighborhood had the gossip on it spread in a matter of days. For his own sanity Pat had moved in with Sam on the north side of town up in Towson.

"Hey, Pat...Sam, good to see you guys," Brian said.

"Big night for you, isn't it?" Pat said.

"Yeah, guess so," Brian replied.

"You sing as well as you box and the world will stand up for you," Sam said.

He didn't quite understand what Sam meant but it sounded like a compliment.

"Thanks, guys, I'd give you a hug, but this isn't the place."

"Yeah, we know," Pat said. "Are they still talking?"

"Not much," Brian said, "been other things to chat about. Sorry, you're yesterday's news."

Pat and Sam both laughed in unison. Damn, they made a great looking couple.

"Oh, there are my parents," Brian said. "I have to go."

"Knock 'em dead, Brian," Pat said with a smile.

He was still a gorgeous man and Brian would always remember how close they had been. Sam was the lucky one. Before he moved, Pat had given him a framed copy of the boxing drawing. It hung on the wall above his dresser. Brian regarded it as a tribute to his youthful foolishness.

Brian's parents were all dressed up this evening; his Mom was wearing that new dress she had fussed over for three hours the last time they were at the Westside Mall.

"Good luck, dear. Give it your best shot," she said.

Ever since the boxing ring disaster, his mother seemed to have developed doubts about his ability to avoid getting hurt while attempting things. Brian could only smile because it showed she really cared.

His father presented his comb and said Brian would probably need a haircut real soon. Ever the practical manager, but Brian could tell he was proud of his son. He ran the comb along the sides of his head and handed it back. Then his parents took off to fight their way into the pews.

Brian looked for Mr. Hanson, figuring he would be easy to spot towering over the heads of the crowd. Instead he saw John enter the rear doorway and headed right over even as the organ began to fill the background.

"John, glad you came," Brian said.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," John laughed. "Poor Claude is out there trying to find a parking place and I didn't want to miss a note."

"I won't sing until just before the Gospel is read," Brian told him.

"Ready for it?"

"Yes, thank you. Because of you I can."

"Well, that's high praise but I didn't do a thing, Brian. I only gave you the key and you unlocked that door all by yourself."

The organ notes changed and Brian knew that the choir would be assembling in the rear lobby. They were part of the processional as the priests made their way into the church.

"I have to go, John. Wish me luck."

"You make your own luck, Brian, but you may have mine as well."

Impulsively Brian hugged him, and he heard John sigh. He had never touched the man like that before and was a little shocked at how hard and muscular his body felt under that suit. Hanson ducked in as Brian lined up with the other choir members and they only managed a small wave to one another.

And so the service began. In about thirty minutes Brian would stand before the choir in the high loft above the congregation. He had a few last minute doubts but then the training kicked in and he followed the others down the aisle towards the altar.

They separated to the left and right as assigned and sang their first group carol before the beginning of the mass. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was so well known that some of the congregation joined in. It was a warm way to begin the service.

Brian's solo was in Latin and he barely understood the meaning of the words he would sing, although everyone would know the song when they heard it. It was during that part of the service where the mass stopped to allow the choir a chance to pull the crowd together. Before Father Connor beat them down with a lengthy sermon, Brian joked. Dominic had taken a dim view of his comments about this at practice.

When the mass proper began they filed back down the aisle and climbed the forty-four steps to the loft. Brian had once attempted to find significance in the number of steps and had come up with no reasonable explanation. But it was still a habit to count them as he climbed. A nervous habit no doubt, but tonight they were significant as never before.

It had all come together at one time. He was sixteen and singing his first solo before those that knew him, or thought they did. Maybe if he sang out loud and

clear... "I'm queer, I'm queer," there would be a different response other than the smiles that had greeted him earlier.

But as they stood waiting for the next cue from Dominic, Brian looked about the church as if seeing it for the first time. He was surrounded by shuffling boys, some who looked as if they should have taken a bathroom break earlier and still a few others that were nervous about singing in their first Christmas mass. The choir was a living, breathing entity, made up of parts, some old, some new. It had been here for almost fifty years and his tenure was but a brief moment in the glory of it all.

He sighed and immediately felt better. Gabe had only been a part of the machine, just as he too would step forward and make the wheels turn. Theirs was only a small part, and it was the beginning of a thought taking shape in his mind. The congregation and the choir, they were all parts of the whole. And if that were true then the parts made up the church and not the other way round.

The Church wasn't his only faith, these people were. Brian had grown up in their midst and they all worshiped the same God. The Church depended upon them more than they depended upon the building that housed their faith. God wouldn't leave their hearts and minds just because they stepped out the door.

Out there, on the streets of the Bay, they were just as faithful to their God. They didn't need the priests telling them how to do that properly. Only here, within these tall stone walls, did they allow the priests to say the mass for them. Another thought popped into his head, priests were the organ grinders that turned the crank. Did that make the congregation nothing more than trained monkeys dancing to the music? No, if anything they were the sweet song that the organ played.

If what was said in the mass was so vital to the worship of God then why couldn't it all be in English? The regular mass was now said in English, that change had come several years before. Then why persist with the Latin? Dominic had said the church was slow to change traditions but it seemed they were forever stuck in the past. John had said maybe he was just looking for an excuse to pick a fight with the church because of their stance on gay people.

Ok, this was dangerous thinking for a kid that was about to wow the whole church with a lovely solo, Brian thought. He placed it in the "have to discuss with John" file, something to keep shut until at least this song was sung.

They sang another bit of music, "Dona Nobis Pachem," followed by more Latin. "Adoramus Te." And the mass moved along. Did the congregation really know what they were singing? But then Brian knew his solo was a moving piece of music and even the strange language that would issue from his mouth would be well received. And suddenly, he was next up at bat.

Brian heard Father Connor introduce the boys in the choir. He read the names from the program as if it were a breakfast menu at the local Denny's. Lord, listen to him butcher some of those Hungarian names. But Brian's name stood out and he relished the small moment before his big moment arrived. Dominic gestured and Brian stepped forward to the solo position.

About half the congregation could see him now, and he tried not to look down and lose his concentration. The organ began and the full choir began to hum behind him. Each boy was sounding the note he would soon be singing and their harmony gave Brian the shivers. But even as they formed the chords of the music behind him, Brian heard

only one note in his head. And it was all his for the taking. The organ music reached his solo and he opened his mouth. The words of the "Ave Maria" rang from the rafters.

Brian focused on the pronunciation of the words, doing his best to sound out each one within the confines of the notes allowed. He could hear this echoing voice bouncing off the wall behind the altar where Jesus hung on the cross. Was that really his voice?

He was singing about the woman the Bible said was Jesus' mother. And he wondered if she ever had any doubts about his abilities when Jesus was a child. The Bible stories never spoke to those simple issues, the ones that Brian really wanted to understand about the man they worshiped as God.

The choir joined in the song but there was no doubt that Brian's voice hung out in front of them. And suddenly he realized it was this spot, the very place where he stood that made it seem so much stronger. He was standing on the sweet spot where all sound was amplified best.

No wonder Gabe had sounded so good here, he knew it and Brian didn't. The brat could have at least told him. But he was gone and Brian stood here in his place. Thinking of Gabe quite suddenly as he sang didn't sadden him as he thought it would. No, if anything he felt closer to God here and that meant closer to the little blonde angel by his side.

Brian hit the highest note in the song and held it while the choir sang on to the finish. He saw Dominic's eyebrows go up and knew he was afraid Brian would lose his place; he always worried about such things. But when Dominic's hands came down Brian cut the note off with the whole choir.

He stepped back and felt a few good natured digs in the ribs from the boys around him. They whispered amongst themselves and "awesome" was the word he heard the most. Dominic made a motion for them to sit and smiled at Brian before turning his attention to the priest in the pulpit. Brian felt a few knuckles knock on his skull and smiled, they all liked it.

Gabe was banished from the choir loft. His ghost had dissolved with a single note as it bounced from the rafters to where the image of God hung on the wall behind the altar. Yes, Brian decided, it was time to have a talk with John about this Church.

LESSONS LEARNED

As if his new found fame in the choir at church wasn't enough, the article that appeared shortly afterwards in the Baltimore Sun Times newspaper capped it for Brian. There on page one of the Sports section was a photo of the boxing team. On page two were some individual shots, including Brian's, and a lengthy article about the boys.

A reporter and photographer had spent the previous Saturday combing the garage and asking all the boys questions. Brian had seen Coach Hanson talking with the guy as much as he saw Mr. Wayne avoiding the camera. The Christmas mass was still on his mind and so he didn't pay that much attention. But thanks to Sean, Brian Mahoney was named as the outstanding boxer on the team. Sean said it to the reporter so they must have thought it was true. Brian knew he would have to torture the boy later for putting him on the spot.

The captions and the article itself contained Brian's name and Sean's, along with all the other boys. Overnight they became celebrities thanks to Pete Mattingly, the sports

reporter and a good friend of Sam's. Brian couldn't have asked for a worse disaster, a double whammy. His life had suddenly gone public.

The aftermath of the mass had been all warm and fuzzy. The choir had gone back downstairs, the kids each seeking out their parents in the congregation to sing carols. Brian's mother shed tears when they all sang "Silent Night," while his father's hand never left his shoulder. He had scored big points with them both. It seemed like a little Ave Maria could go a long way.

But it was after the service that Brian saw everyone else looking at him with great smiles and all that goodwill towards men. People he only knew casually thanked him for the joy that song had brought them. It was touching until he noticed that a lot of girls were looking at him quite differently too.

Until now he had been a stranger in the wider game of boy/girl that played out in living rooms and basements across the Bay. But he understood those looks; they were sizing him up for a go at it. What a disaster.

Pat and Sam had vanished after the service, but the Coach and John approached while Brian was standing with his parents.

"Excellent voice," John said.

"Yes, Brian, you did yourself proud," Hanson said.

His parents stood there beaming with pride as Hanson introduced John. And for the very first time Brian learned John's place in the grand scheme of things.

"I would like to introduce John Martin," Hanson said. "He was my boxing coach back in the early days while I was in the Navy."

The Mahoney's were all smiles while shaking hands. Brian looked up into John's face with new appreciation and the man gave him a wink.

"Thank you both for coming," Brian said.

"We both enjoyed the mass," John said and Brian knew he meant it.

"Yes we did, you rest up this week. We have some big things to talk about next Saturday," Hanson said. And before Brian could ask what he meant, they were gone.

"I have to go change," he told his parents.

"I understand," his father said. "Just be home in a couple of hours, ok?"

And he said that with a great amount of love and pride. Brian had won more than a battle with his ghost tonight; his father was beginning to see him as a man.

It was Christmas Eve and the hours would soon melt away. Brian knew Sean was here somewhere; he wouldn't have missed it for anything. And no sooner had he thought that than the boy appeared before him with a big smile.

"Come on, I have surprise for you," Sean said.

Brian threw off the choir robe and dropped it in the laundry basket beside the door to the vestment room. In less than a minute, they burst out the side door of the church and into the alley. The sky was full of small white flakes that had already blanketed the ground.

"Oh...beautiful, a white Christmas, " Brian cried.

"That's only part of the surprise, " Sean said.

They took the steps down towards the basement door. It had been locked these past few months but Sean grinned and produced a key.

"How...?" Brian began.

"My father is a deacon, remember? I found this on his dresser this morning, he won't miss it tonight."

Sean opened the door and they locked themselves inside. The furnace sat growling in the corner as Brian pulled the other key down off the molding above the storeroom door. He didn't even pause as it unlocked the old door. Brian felt like the place was his now, and all the privacy it provided was a just reward.

Sean had one joint and that was his surprise or so Brian thought. But he too had been moved by the singing and wouldn't stop gushing about how wonderful Brian sounded until it was smothered by kisses. Brian appreciated the accolades from his best friend, but then Sean was biased in his favor already.

The kisses aroused them and swift hands did quick work in removing both sets of pants. And then Sean gave him a smile.

"I thought we might try something new tonight," he said. His voice was deep and sexy, his eyes passionate. Oh Lord, what now?

"Sean...?" But Brian knew where this was going. They tasted one another and then Sean took a condom from his pocket, asking him to turn around. It was unexpected, it was slightly painful, but it was everything Brian had wanted from Sean. Oh, John, you were so wrong about this boy.

But then after all the good things that happened during the vacation, on the Monday after the New Year, their lives at school revealed the other side of the coin. By second period Brian couldn't ignore the stares anymore. Did every kid in this school read the newspaper?

Sean cornered him in the hall outside their third period class.

"I have two seniors that want to beat my ass," Sean said. "I didn't expect this to happen."

"Boxing gives me the confidence to defend myself, said Sean Williams of the CBBL." Sean shook his head but Brian continued. "I'm quoting you in case you don't remember how much your mouth has gotten us in some deep shit here. And the Curtis Bay Boxing League, when the hell did that name spring up?" Brian asked.

"Did I really say that? Oh shit, I'm doomed."

"You and me both. I'm lucky they got to you first. Will you please give them some of that whoop-ass confidence for me too? Crush them both."

"Whoa, do you know how much bigger than me they are?"

"It won't fly, Hanson will be all over it," Brian said.

"You wish, he's not here today," Sean said.

"Oh shit, for the both of us."

Before lunch period the two seniors had cornered Brian too.

"After school on the basketball court, asshole, or we kill your friend."

They had said pretty much the same to Sean about him. They were defending one another's lives it seemed. Brian skipped lunch and went over to the garage. Mr. Wayne would be there, he always was.

"No way are you gonna fight those boys on no basketball court. They gonna rub your pretty face on the cold hard asphalt," he warned. "How about you bring them over here and use the ring. I believe that's what Coach would want you to do."

"Nice thought but they are both bigger than me or Sean, probably have an eight inch reach on us too."

"But you boys both have skill and speed. Somehow I don't think it will happen like you think," Mr. Wayne said. "Let's try it, at least you can teach them something useful."

"Ok, at least we will have a witness to the killing."

"No body gonna die here, you'll see." His grin was reminiscent of the look he'd given Brian after Mark had been KO'd. Maybe this would work.

Stan Burgess and Alan McCarthy were the two toughs in question and simply, they wanted to beat the crap out of the famous little sophmores. Since beating up celebrities seemed to be their objective, Sean thought they ought to teach the boys a lesson. The only question was how?

Somehow the boys agreed to move the scheduled beating over to the garage, something about the basketball players not wanting blood on the outdoor court. If the whole school knew about this then it sure seemed strange that no one was objecting.

Stan and Alan looked around the garage as if looking for a good place to stash some bodies. Once satisfied they began to take off their jackets for the fight. Mr. Wayne appeared out of the office with gloves and headgear.

"You boys ready to spar?" he asked.

"No sparring, we're just gonna punch their lights out," Alan said.

"They can't fight like that, against the law," Wayne said.

"Against what law?" Stan laughed.

"State law. They fight outside the ring and you will all be arrested. If they get hurt the cops gonna be asking all kind of questions. They are still juveniles, but you isn't. Best you fight in the ring."

"Ok, I can fight them anywhere," Alan said.

"You best be wearing these things too. Might save you some damage," Wayne said.

"I don't box with gloves, man," Stan said.

His reaction to Mr. Wayne was more belligerent than normal, and Brian could tell he was one of those racist assholes living in the Bay. To him Mr. Wayne was just another...well, Brian never used that nasty word. Mr. Wayne was not like that at all, if anything he was one of the kindest, gentlest men the boys ever knew. But Brian also knew if he was riled up it would be different. Stan had better be careful.

"A boxing glove protects the hand," Brian explained. "The weight of the glove distributes the force of the blow. If anything, it is designed for maximum impact, I know, I've been hit enough times by one."

"Well now you gonna be hit by a real man, not one of your sissy team mates," Alan said. "I'll wear the gloves."

Brian winked at Sean and put on the other set. Wayne fastened the headgear in place on both of them and grinned. Brian climbed into the ring and felt the familiar bounce. His tennis shoes felt funny but they would serve.

If he KO'd Alan then Stan would probably take off running. They could have a good laugh at his expense while waiting for the ambulance to take Alan to the hospital.

Brian started bouncing on his toes, shaking the blues away as Hanson called it. It was how he focused. He concentrated on his opponent and didn't like what he saw. The senior was a good eight inches taller, his arms longer and he outweighed Brian by about thirty pounds. Oh well, that just meant he would hit the deck harder.

"Stop bouncing like a yo-yo, you yo-yo," Alan laughed. "Come to daddy."

Instead he came at Brian who ducked the punch before dancing away. Then he stopped as something occurred to him.

"You're going about this the wrong way," Brian said.

Sean was looking at him like he had lost his mind, but Wayne still had that happy grin.

"You want a real fight with me then you need to learn how to fight like me," Brian continued. "Your hands are all wrong, raise your gloves and protect your face. That's it, now move one foot back slightly, good. You need a proper stance to punch hard. Hey, man, you could be a good boxer."

Alan took a swing and Brian allowed the glove to hit the side of his head. The boy punched like a girl, no offense to the ladies. There was no skill or design to his punches so Brian decided to let him have a few of his own.

"Hate to say it Alan but that didn't come close to how hard some of the team guys nail me in practice."

"I've knocked Stan over with less than that," Alan replied.

Now Sean was standing next to Mr. Wayne and grinning.

"You guys shadow box? Ever practice with one another?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, we go at it all the time," Alan said.

"I have to see this," Brian said. "Something is wrong here."

A few minutes later both of them were in the ring sparring. Brian stood in the coaching corner and began to tell them how to improve their shots. He could tell they were familiar with one another by the way they tried to take advantage of weaknesses. It was what Sean did to him all the time.

He changed their stance a few times, repositioned their balance and admonished them to keep their damn gloves up.

"Fine, fine, but Stan, he's gonna punch your lights out unless you keep those gloves up," Brian said. "What's a few blows to the stomach, it's your chin and face you need to protect."

"You think you can get through to me?" Stan challenged.

Brian looked at the boy's longer arms and was just grateful that he didn't know how to use the advantage. "This isn't about hurting you, remember that, ok?"

"Go ahead, give it your best shot, fag boy."

That was the wrong thing to say to Brian but Stan didn't know that. Sean looked startled. He thought Brian was crazy as he motioned Stan to the center of the ring. Brian danced left, left, and right to get him off balance. A few jabs at Stan's gloves and smartly he brought them up to cover his face.

Quickly Brian gave the boy a one-two to the stomach and watched him cringe. With that long reach Stan landed a punch in Brian's gut but left himself open in the process and he got back the Marky special to the chin. But Stan was a tough kid and it just staggered him. He came back at Brian with a series of straight jabs which were easily blocked.

Brian had him figured for a roundhouse right hand punch and was ready when he threw it. All he did was duck under the arm and sink his right glove in the boy's belly. Stan deflated like yesterday's birthday balloon.

Alan whooped. "I get him like that all the time."

Stan was bent over and madder than hell. If he went loco on Brian's ass there would be a world of hurt before he was taken down. Yeah, but taking him out wasn't the point of this exercise anymore.

"I didn't hurt you," Brian said. "You just weren't ready for it, Stan. Boxers take gut shots all the time. You train for it and you just have to roll with it when it happens."

"I couldn't stop you, I saw it coming," he groaned.

"I could show you how to block the blow, but then Alan won't be able to get to you any more."

Stan looked up and grinned through the pain. "Show me."

And with that the match was won. Both Sean and Brian were in the ring with these two when Hanson finally made an appearance. He sat back with Mr. Wayne and watched. After a while he looked up and called a halt to the proceedings.

"You boys want to box for real?" Hanson asked.

"Yes sir," they replied in unison.

"We fight like men, black and white together against a common enemy, and you know who that is?"

"Ourselves," Sean and Brian shouted together. How many times had they heard that question in practice?

"Yes, ourselves. The bad habits that show themselves when we each think "I know it all." And for that we get beat in the ring. This matter of boxing is no joke guys, it is a killer course in how weak your body is but you'll overcome that and every girl in town will be after you. Hope you can stand the pressure."

With that statement, Hanson turned around and left.

"Wednesday then, right after school. And a word of advice, don't eat a big lunch, it makes throwing up easier," Brian said.

The seniors actually said good bye and shook hands on the way out the door. Mr. Wayne smiled. "You boys sure showed them a thing or two, said you would, now didn't I?"