

## Chapter Thirteen

### DREAMS AND MILESTONES

Brian found himself dressed in his Sunday best, standing at the altar in Saint B's and facing the congregation. To his right in the front pew stood his parents, his father with a somber church face and his mother...his mother was...crying? The organ played and Brian tried to remember where he had heard that song before. He turned to his left and discovered Adam standing beside him. They looked at one another and smiled.

Suddenly Brian realized as the music came to a crescendo that it was The Wedding March. Wedding? He looked up at the congregation and they looked back at him with anticipation. The notes of the organ faded and the church became silent.

"Shall we begin?" A voice said from behind him. Brian turned and saw Father Dominic dressed in his resplendent white robes. Wedding? Brian looked over at Adam and suddenly it hit him. They were being married. Here...in this church?

There was a sudden flash of white light and the scene changed. Adam was gone, his parents were gone, the congregation...everything had vanished. The only remnant a smell of fresh flowers mingled with the pungent odor of stale incense.

Brian was standing alone at the foot of the altar. The building was dark except for a beam of light which shown upon the cross and the body of Jesus hanging above the altar.

Jesus was looking down at him. Any second Brian was expecting to hear the voice of God. But the image was silent, still hanging in the agony depicted by the carved figure.

"Why me?" Brian whispered aloud.

A shimmering light seemed to descend around him and Brian gazed up at the ceiling looking for the source. But when his eyes descended he saw Gabriel standing there in front of the altar.

The boy was dressed in a white pleated robe and a small golden ring adorned his head. His long blonde hair seemed to move with an unseen breeze and Brian heard himself gasp as he beheld the wings affixed right behind Gabriel's shoulders.

"Gabriel...you *are* an angel," Brian whispered.

And the angel smiled in response. "You gave me my wings," he said. "Your prayers brought me into Heaven and your song makes God smile."

Gabriel leaned forward and his face came closer. Brian felt only a slight breeze as the angel kissed his cheek.

"I have come to tell you...there is a place for us in The Church," the angel said. "Never lose faith, no matter how hard it becomes. I am watching over you, always."

"I still pray for you every night," Brian said.

"I know you do, it's a great comfort to me, and it's a sign of your faith in Him." Gabriel said, turning to look up at the figure on the cross.

Brian reached out to touch Gabriel's hand but there was nothing of substance he could feel. The angel looked down at him and Brian realized he could see through the image as it slowly rose above the altar steps.

"My body is in the ground, Brian, I have no substance. All you see before you is my spirit," the angel said. "But don't let that worry you, I am happy here. Let it be enough that you have finally found true love, while I will always be loved as part of the Sacred Host."

"You know about Adam?" Brian asked.

"Of course, I watch over you both. He's a fine choice, in my opinion. He has great inner strength and he adores you, but then you already know that. You have a kind heart and you mean the world to him."

"And you...I loved you too," Brian said. "But..."

"You can stop right there. I didn't love myself and you couldn't help me with that. What I did was foolish, but no one could stop me, not even you."

"I'm so sorry," Brian said.

"It is done. Enjoy your life, Brian. I imagine it won't always be easy but that won't stop you. God is watching over you. Keep praying for me...I will always be there for you."

Brian felt the breeze grow stronger even as Gabriel's image began to fade. Tears were coursing down his cheeks but he felt a great joy inside. The angel was gone and Brian found himself alone with Jesus.

"Thank you," Brian said, looking up at the figure on the cross. "Thank you," he repeated over and over again.

And then his eyes opened in the darkness of his room. It had all been a dream but every detail had seemed so real. Beside him Adam snored lightly and Brian rolled over, placing his arm over the boy's chest, pulling him closer.

It was Saturday morning and he was seventeen. Better yet, they didn't have to go to boxing practice today. Brian smiled at that thought, he could stay here with Adam a while longer. His heart was beating faster, the rush from so many things coming at him all at once. They had been so busy these past few months that his birthday had come almost as a surprise.

They'd had a quiet family dinner and a cake at Brian's insistence. His parents gave him clothing and Adam; well he really didn't want Adam to spend any money on a gift, but he had. Brian knew the gold chain hanging around his neck was worth at least a hundred dollars. It was too lavish, a waste of all that hard earned money the boy was supposed to be saving, but there was no denying Adam his joy at giving it. And then their lives had moved on.

Today was the concert at the Soldier's Home, such a great opportunity and yet the anxiety of performing lingered. But the angel had spoken to him in that dream, Gabriel had finally spoken.

There had been other dreams in which the boy had appeared but he had never uttered a word until now. Brian discounted the absurd opening scenes of his dream; they were always nonsensical at first. But no matter what the beginning, each dream always led back to the church and the vision of angels.

John had told him that such dreams were not uncommon since he was still trying to work out the relationship between church and personal issues. Gabriel was like a substitute for his old pal Benny, the imaginary friend. Neither of them ever told Brian anything except what he wanted to hear in his own heart.

Marriage...where had that come from? That had to be a direct connection to the Church's teaching. Was their commitment any less valid because they were gay? Brian wondered if there would ever be a gay marriage in his church. No, the marriage was all just part of his fantasy life with Adam.

But Adam was a living, breathing person, and as such he has needs, John cautioned him. "You must think towards the future. For as time passes the two of you will face a

host of challenges to your relationship. People in love create tenderness and sensitivity between them, but that often means friction when expectations are not met.

"And I'm not just talking about the needs you share with Adam, but the demands others place upon you both. Parents, friends, teachers, coaches, they all make demands of you. Someday it will all seem like too much for you to bear, but that is why I am here."

And Brian could only agree. John had been the wise voice of reason and comfort this past year. His sixteenth year had been full of triumph on the home front, but he was less successful in the classroom.

He couldn't ride on the coattails of his boxing accomplishments for much longer. His teachers were becoming more demanding and Brian struggled to keep up with the assignments. Even Hanson had noticed that his grades were moving dangerously close to the margin where Brian would find himself in trouble with the sports program. Every student in the CBBL was expected to maintain a C or better average to stay in competition. But Brian found his math and English grades were dragging him down.

It was only made harder by the fact that Adam found school so easy. At first the boy had tried to play the role of tutor but Brian just couldn't focus on the written page. Anything like close proximity between them turned his mind to other things. But Hanson had an answer for his star boxer, it was called study hall.

After school detention felt wrong, for study hall by any other name still felt like punishment. It angered Brian at first because it meant Adam was left alone in the practice room for the first ninety minutes of their usual workout. But he had no one but himself to blame for this predicament and the only way out was to do the work.

It made the weekends a special time between them. Saturday workouts in the morning, followed by a trip to the mall to see a movie or a few hours of playing around with the recording equipment before dinner. Sunday they sat in church together, had breakfast after Brian took communion and then more togetherness as they sat doing homework for a few hours.

Adam didn't seem to mind when their lives fell into such a placid routine. There was a greater sense of security in his life now, a feeling that he had earned his place amidst the Mahoney's and become one of them.

The afternoon concert at the Soldier's Home auditorium was packed with residents and members of the community. The first music recording of the choir had been making the rounds in the Bay area for months to rave reviews.

The excitement of capturing a live performance energized Adam to set up every piece of equipment he possessed. A project Mr. Mahoney supported by transporting Adam and his electronics to the auditorium several hours before the scheduled event.

Liz had set up a table in the lobby to take orders for the recording in her usually efficient manner. The demand for the church tapes hadn't diminished and she expected the new one to generate orders twice as large.

It was Mrs. Mahoney's suggestion that the recording should be split in two, bringing in twice the revenue. The first tape a selection of secular music and the second a Christmas recording with all the church pieces. It was a great plan and everything depended upon getting a really good recording of the concert. But then the best laid plans...

The choir looked very professional in their robes wandering around backstage behind the curtains. Sister Mary was there with Father Dominic as he fussed with the

sheet music and consulted with the pianist hired for the occasion. Even he knew that it would take a professional touch on the keyboard to please an audience of this size. But it also left him with the freedom to stand in front of the choir and conduct.

Adam was set up on a table at the right side of the stage and down front. And as the curtain rose to reveal the choir he smiled as the reels turned, recording the generous applause of the audience. The choir opened with a patriotic song in honor of the former soldiers seated across the front rows.

The medley of songs began with 'America the Beautiful' and led into 'Over There' in tribute to the WWI veterans in the crowd and ended with 'God Bless America.' The crowd cheered when they finished and the boys in the choir beamed back at them. Only Adam seemed unsure of himself at that point, his equipment seemed to be experiencing some difficulty.

Brian had noticed Adam checking all his connections while they sang those first songs, as if something major was wrong. It wasn't until they finished the last song and were preparing to move into the first of the church music that he heard the whine. Adam was looking at his equipment, his hands pressing the earphones tight against his head.

The piano started playing the 'Donna Nobis Pachem' and Brian could still hear the whine in the air. Adam looked up at the stage and shook his head. The recording wasn't going well at all. The choir sang on into the program, ignoring the high pitched noise. Brian sang his first solo and almost faltered as he saw Adam take off the earphones and stop his recording machine.

The sound was still floating in the air as they finished up the first half of the scheduled music and went into the intermission. Brian looked out on the audience and slowly the whine faded. He watched as maybe a half-dozen of the men in the front rows put their fingers up to their ears. The noise ceased completely as the men turned down the volume on their hearing aids.

Adam looked dejected when Brian finally made it through the curtain as intermission started.

"Did you hear that?" Brian asked.

"It took me a while, but I figured it out," Adam said. "Nothing we can do about it, I suppose. Those guys did come to hear the music after all."

"I'm sorry, Adam. It spoiled your recording."

"You still sounded great. I'll get it another time. A shame really, this place makes you guys sound even better than the church, no echoes to worry about," Adam said.

"Liz," Brian yelled, "I'll bet she's taken a hundred orders already."

"Well you better go stop her, this mess isn't going anywhere," Adam said.

But it was too late. Liz already had more than a hundred orders in hand when Brian finally made his way out to the lobby. And worse, many people had already given her money in advance for a copy of the recording which wasn't going to happen. There were several dozen people in line waiting to sign up and Brian didn't see how he could stop the process.

His father was less than pleased when Brian finally found him in the crowd.

"You mean he can't get a recording?" Mr. Mahoney asked.

"No, the hearing aids are making it impossible, that whine is coming through on the microphones," Brian said.

"Then we have a real mess on our hands. These folks will be expecting a tape by Thanksgiving."

"I better go talk to Father Dominic," Brian said.

Moving through the crowd, Brian found people wanted him to stop and talk. The more compliments he got the worse he felt about the recording. Finally he reached the door up to the stage and found Dominic talking to Father Connor.

"Father, excuse me, but we have a problem," Brian began, and then he explained the situation. Father Connor stood quietly by until he was finished and then he smiled.

"May I suggest something?" the Monsignor said.

"Please, Father," Brian said.

"It would be a shame to return all that money, not to mention that the choir's reputation would be tarnished. Do you think we could arrange a second performance just for the recording?"

"Today?" Dominic gasped. "Those poor children have been singing their hearts out, Father; they have to be tired by now."

"Not at all," Brian said. "I'm not tired in the least."

"Good," Father Connor said. "I'm sure the veterans will be taking their supper after we finish up so they won't be contributing to the problem while we record. In fact, why don't we ask the audience to stay on with us? The applause certainly adds great distinction after every song; we can't get that touch in the church."

"Please, Father, you're a lifesaver," Brian said.

"It goes with job, Brian. Would you like to make the announcement?"

"Me, Father?" And then Brian had a vision of Adam sitting so dejectedly behind his recording console. Nothing would make him happier at the moment. "I'll do it," Brian said.

The curtain opened for the second part of the performance and Brian stepped forward as if he were going to sing.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...parents and friends," he began. The whine had already begun emanating from the front rows but he ignored it. Only Adam knew what he was about to say.

"Speaking for myself, and the other members of the choir, we would like to thank you for coming here today. Your support has meant so much to us. But we would also like you to stay after the performance and join us in recording the music which so many of you have already purchased.

"A live recording should include the audience, and you have been a great inspiration to our musical performance. In addition, Saint Benedict's parish has been so generous in its support that today I want to announce that the proceeds from these recordings will go towards a scholarship fund. There are many good families in our neighborhood that would like to send a child to the parish school. We can make that possible with your help."

There was a murmur of approval from the audience and someone started clapping in appreciation. Soon the entire audience had joined in and Brian stood there in wonder as people rose to their feet. He looked over at Adam and saw the grin on his face, nothing could please him better.

Brian turned to resume his place in the choir as Dominic came forward. His eyes were brimming with tears of joy as he placed his hands on Brian's shoulders. Without a

word Dominic gave Brian a hug and cheers broke out in the audience. He was embarrassed at the attention and struggled to compose himself before he had to sing.

They had chosen to do the right thing in starting the scholarship fund. But what happened during the weeks following that recording was astounding. The session had lasted for ninety minutes after the concert. More than half the audience had remained to support the boy's efforts and had dutifully clapped in all the right places. Adam didn't lose his grin for a moment as the tape spooled through the recorder capturing every nuance of the performance.

Liz had made a list of over two hundred and forty names in her order book and her purse was stuffed with cash and checks. Their work in reproducing the music on cassettes for the sale was going to be monumental. Brian knew they had done a good thing but maybe it had gone a bit overboard.

It was the following morning after mass that Father Connor approached the Mahoney's as they were leaving church.

"Father Connor," Bill Mahoney said as the family stood beside him.

The elder priest shook his hand and then looked over at Brian, with Adam standing beside him. "I didn't get a chance to thank you boys for what you said and did yesterday. I'm sure your parents are very proud of what you've done. But your generosity and kindness kept me up pretty late last night as well."

He smiled. "I may not know much about the recording business but I can imagine you're faced with a very large task in meeting all those orders. Am I right?"

Adam nodded. "It's huge," he said.

"I thought so," Father Connor chuckled. "And so I made a few calls around town this morning and I have a gift to offer you in return. You see, old parish priests make a lot of friends over the years and I called one of them. He owns the Brighton Studios up in Towson and he is offering free use of his studio for the mastering of your recording. On top of that, he will give us a really good wholesale price on duplicating the tapes.

"Seems like all we need now is for you boys to take him up on the offer and go get things started. But you had better jump right on it. The parish phone is ringing off the hook about those tapes. I guess somebody has been talking about it because people all over town want a copy."

Brian was stunned; he hadn't expected it to go this big. Of course Adam would be the one to go up to Towson, he was the genius behind the project. So far they had collected over a thousand dollars in advance, and that wasn't even the half of it. But time was short and so the boys talked about the project at the breakfast table.

"You'll have to call Mr. Woods first thing tomorrow," Brian said, talking about the owner of Brighton Studios. He was looking at the piece of paper on which Father Connor had written the phone number and address of the place.

"What about school?" Mrs. Mahoney asked.

"Would it be ok if I took a day off to do this?" Adam asked.

It was the first time he had deferred to Mr. and Mrs. Mahoney for something as if they were really his parents. The moment wasn't lost on Alice Mahoney who looked over at her husband for the answer.

He grinned. "I suppose we can get you off for one day. In fact, I had better drive you up there. Wouldn't want anything to happen to that precious tape."

"You're going to take a day off from work?" Brian said. "What about me?"

"You have to go to school," Adam said. "We both can't ditch out, and anyway, you have study hall."

"No fair," Brian moaned.

"I'll make sure you're there when we do the final cut, ok?" Adam said.

"We'd all like to be there," Mr. Mahoney said. "Did you see how proud Father Connor was? This thing is snowballing already, it might get really big."

And so it did. The following day, Adam and Mr. Mahoney were off to Towson. Evan Woods turned out to be a large affable man whose interest in the tape Adam had made became sincerely professional when he discovered how good the raw material had turned out.

Adam was amazed at the studio equipment. Although he recognized the majority of it, there were so many new things to learn. He and Evan ran the tape, cleaning up any noise by running it through a series of filters before they began work on the master copy. By lunchtime they had split the tracks into two masters of approximately forty-five minutes apiece. But there was a five minute gap that needed to be filled on the Christmas music tape.

"Have you got anything else for me?" Evan asked.

Adam smiled, "I have this one piece we should include from an earlier performance. It was awesome, but the acoustics are different than the hall."

"Bring it on," Evan said, "we can fiddle with it."

Adam produced the recording he'd made in the church and wound the tape up to the mark. Evan listened with close concentration. The bell like tones of the church added a haunting quality to the recording and they sat in amazement as the sound echoed from the studio speakers.

"Awesome," he said when it was done. "You recorded this? How old are you anyway?"

"Eighteen," Adam said.

Evan smiled. "Come back when you get out of school, ok? I'll have a job waiting for you."

They had agreed on making a thousand copies of the music on tape and Evan agreed they might even want to consider pressing a few LP records as well. But by the time Thursday choir practice came around, that number seemed much too small for the demand.

Father Connor had come to practice and was standing beside Father Dominic when Brian walked in with Liz and Adam close behind. There were several men and a woman sitting in chairs beside the piano. Brian was mildly shocked to see them since they'd never had an audience at rehearsal before.

"Brian, Adam...let me introduce Mr. Devers and Miss Lawrence, they're with the television news," Father Connor said.

Brian remembered the woman immediately from the evening news programs. The boys shook hands with the reporters as the other boys began arriving for practice.

"Mr. Devers produces the evening news on channel 20," Father Connor said. "They want to film the choir at mass on Sunday."

Brian could tell the Monsignor wasn't exactly pleased about the request. Cameras and lights in the House of God on a Sunday were going to be a big distraction from the purpose of the mass.

"Oh," Brian said. "Shouldn't we do it after the mass?"

"I was just suggesting that," Father Connor said with a smile, at least Brian was on his side.

"We were hoping to get some shots of the mass itself as you sang," Miss Lawrence said. "The whole point of the boy's choir singing as part of the mass seems to be the better story."

"The choir loft is a little small for all of us," Brian said. "Could you take some pictures of the mass before it started? Then we could bring the whole choir down and sing on the altar after mass, lots of room for your cameras up there."

"Good suggestion," Mr. Devers said. "We can work with that."

Father Connor looked relieved as the boys all started talking about being on television. Adam stepped up to Mr. Devers and handed him a cassette.

"That's an advanced copy of the choir performance we made last weekend. The final mix will be better, but this will give you an idea of what you'll see on Sunday. Thought you might enjoy playing a little Christmas music back at the station."

"Really, why thank you...and what part do you sing?" Devers asked.

Adam smiled but then Brian stepped in. "This is Adam Farmer. He's the genius that made the recording for us."

Adam laughed. "And lucky for you, I don't sing a note on it."

The following day all they talked about was the mass and the evening news. Soon the whole city would be seeing the choir perform and Brian could almost feel the excitement in the neighborhood.

Friday night, the Mahoney's sat down for dinner only to have the phone ring. Mr. Mahoney answered it but then turned to Adam. "Father Connor wants to talk with you," he said.

Adam took the phone and said hello. He listened for a minute and then wrote something down on the notepad beside the phone. Brian heard him say thank you and then he hung up. Adam returned to the table and sat down. The moment of suspense was too much for Brian.

"What now?" he asked.

Adam tried to play it coy but he just couldn't take that grin off his face. "Mr. Devers called the parish office. Seems he's been playing our tape at the studio and now he wants to buy five hundred copies from us. The station is going to send them out to their business clients and affiliates across the country as Christmas gifts."

"Oh my," Mrs. Mahoney said, "Five hundred?"

"You mean all across the country?" Brian asked.

"The whole country. So I guess this would be a good time to tell you my little secret before that happens," Adam said. "We needed a few minutes to fill up the Christmas tape so Evan and I re-mastered the 'Ave Maria' from the earlier recording. It fits in perfectly."

"Oh my." Mr. Mahoney said, "That was a beautiful song."

Brian didn't know what to say. He had always thought it was one of his best performances and now everyone was going to hear it. He looked across the table at Adam and saw the boy was waiting for some reaction to the announcement.

"I...I don't know what to say," Brian stammered, but his eyes told Adam what he was thinking.

"What a lovely thing to do, Adam," Mrs. Mahoney said, and she reached over to pat the boy's hand. Brian wanted to leap across the table and hug him, but that would have to wait.

"Only one problem remains," Adam said. "We need some cover art, any suggestions?"

"We need an angel on the cover," Brian said. "With our church in the background."

"I was thinking about a photo of the choir," Adam said.

"That too, but put it on the back," Brian said. "We need an angel. And I know just the person to draw one."

After dinner, as the Mahoney's discussed the best place to take a picture of the choir, Brian got on the phone. Patrick picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Pat, its Brian...I want to make you famous."

"Oh, you do? Is it illegal?" Patrick asked.

"Furthest thing from it, but you'll like my idea," Brian said.

He went on to explain about the recording and the need for cover art on the cassettes and albums Evan was about to have pressed. Patrick listened for a few minutes and then responded.

"I like the idea, I can do that. Do you want it in color?"

"Yes, the colors are important," Brian said.

Patrick paused and then replied. "You want the angel to look like him, don't you?"

"Yes," Brian sighed, "it has to."

"I can do that. Can I get it to you next week?" Patrick asked.

"The sooner the better," Brian said. "Thanksgiving is right around the corner and the music has to out before then."

"Do I get a copy?"

"I'll give you a dozen copies. And better, I'll make sure your name is on the cover too."

Patrick laughed. "As a struggling artist, I have to thank you very much."

"Do you need to get paid for this?" Brian asked.

"No, Brian, I'll do it because I love you," Patrick said. "Wish me luck."

"I love you too," Brian said and he hung up before Patrick could recognize the emotion in his voice.

It was hard getting to sleep that night. Adam finally fell asleep after they had talked for what seemed like hours. He understood the symbolism of the angel and hoped that by using it on the cover it might finally exorcise the thought from Brian's mind.

Adam had never met Gabriel but the shadow of that boy's tragedy haunted their relationship. It didn't give him feelings of insecurity. How could he be jealous of the dead? But he also knew Brian had that portion of his past ingrained to his very soul and that was extremely sad.

Brian lay with his eyes closed, but thinking about what Patrick might draw. How would he depict the angel? Would it be obvious to everyone that Gabriel's face was on the cover of their music? He wanted that and yet, would it make him feel any better?

Maybe he shouldn't dwell on the past, but Gabe had also been a great part of that choir, the best part. It was a shame that there was no recording of that voice, especially since it had been Gabe that inspired him to sing his best solo.

Beside him, Adam breathed deeply and sighed, as if he too shared these thoughts. Brian snuggled against the broad shoulders he loved so much, feeling the warmth against his face. It had been sweet to include his solo on the recording, but that was Adam for you. He had real substance, whereas angels were only thoughts projected in his mind.

The image of a church set against the backlight of the city on a summer's night played in his thoughts. Standing before it on a pedestal was the statue of the angel. Only this creature didn't appear to be made of cold hard marble. It wasn't at all like the ones Brian had seen hanging on the wall in the parish school.

He remembered now, the picture had been hanging on the wall above Gabriel when he sat in that punishment chair. Brian had noticed it just before Gabe made all those obscene gestures. The angel had been carved in stone, standing on the steps of some great building he couldn't identify. But the only angel that had occupied his mind that snowy afternoon was the blonde boy across the hallway.

Patrick would draw Gabriel as an angel, but only Brian had seen through the image. Gabe had been anything but an angel in life and Pat knew that. Would it affect the drawing? He hoped the artist would be kind, for if Pat had his way Gabriel would probably appear with a pointed tail and horns.