

"In a time of crisis, let not darkness from within your soul arise."

DISFIGURED ANGEL

A Grimdark Urban Fantasy



PINNACLE AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

W. WRIGHT

DISFIGURED ANGEL

A GRIMDARK URBAN FANTASY BY
W. WRIGHT

Age recommendation: Young Adult 17+

Copyright © W. Wright (2022)

DISFIGURED ANGEL is a work of fiction (horror) by author W. Wright.

Cover design by W. Wright - copyright © 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including print, photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Copyright infringement is a crime. All rights are reserved by the author.

Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages. This is a work of fiction (fantasy). Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Wright, W.

Disfigured Angel

A Grimdark Urban Fantasy (Horror)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

W. Wright currently resides among the vineyards in the northwestern foothills of North Carolina where he focuses his time on writing and art. After retiring from a career in administration Walt turned his attention to something he had always wanted to do, write science fiction and fantasy novels. His first novel Brimstone's Knight (science fiction) earned him a Pinnacle Book Achievement Award in twenty nineteen. A year later Brimstone's Knight II – The Fall of Wormwood was released. Mr. Wight is also an award winning artist recognized throughout the southeastern United States. News articles and magazines have referred to his unique creative style as retro-renaissance surrealism.



Find out more by visiting the author's website

<http://www.wwrightartist.com>

SUMMARY

Adam Lucius Evans will have a troubling birth, live a hidden childhood, mature into a challenging life, then face a nightmare of a future. Father Harris and Sister Elizabeth see Luke as a disfigured angel. Others see him differently. Luke becomes a friend to the hungry and the homeless who live within the alleys of Chicago. An unexpected turn of events will make him a hero. He will answer the call when his city needs a champion. He will fall in love and eventually he will have to kill to survive. The young monk has the singing voice of an angel, yet he must stay hidden beneath hooded tunics. He was born with Hurler's Syndrome, also known as gargoylism. But something unexpected and far more hideous will enter his life. A deadly darkness will gradually inhabit Luke's consciousness. Deep within the shadows of the young man's mind a vicious beast will manifest itself. It is an ancient creature and extremely clever. Believed to have first appeared in old Romania, they were given the name of *gargoyle*. The origin of these creatures is wrapped in mystery and shrouded by deception. Many believe they roam the world to this day. The truth of these creatures is perhaps lost in history forever. Luke's physical appearance was bad enough without this entity's presence. When he allows it to take full control of his body Luke transforms into a dangerous monster. Despite this Luke feels that he truly needs this terrifying inner beast if he is to survive the dark streets of Chicago's River District. Yet he can't help but wonder, will this strange symbiote be his salvation or will it become his eternal damnation?

This novella is dedicated to those who don't believe in monsters.
Because in the end, they will.

WARNING:

Anyone suffering from mental illness should be cautious.

This book contains matters of moral corruption,
severe birth defects, genetic alterations, an ancient curse,
mental anguish, brutal violence, cannibalism, rape,
death, and bi-polar symbiosis.

“In a time of crisis, let not darkness from within your soul arise.”

PART ONE

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

CHAPTER ONE

Thy Sins Shall Find Thee Out

“Father Harris! Father Harris, are you here?” Lisa Evans shouted across the sanctuary of Saint Matthew’s Cathedral. In a panic she rushed for the back of the church where the vicar’s office was located. She needed his help, *they* needed help. Father Harris stated “Lisa, what a pleasant surprise.” as he appeared from a side door. Lisa ran across the large sanctuary and threw herself in his arms. “We have a problem. I’m pregnant.” She gasped with tears of panic. “Oh my, that is a problem. How do you wish to proceed?” he asked as he directed her to have a seat on the front pew. As she sat down Father Harris looked all around to be certain they were alone. “Proceed? What do you mean?” Lisa inquired with confusion. “Well, do you wish to keep the child?” Father Harris asked as he locked eyes with her. “What? You know as well as I that abortion is not an option!” she snapped with blind fury. Father Harris took her hand and held it in his as he spoke “Of course not, but there are other options. You know this poses a problem with my ministry. Nobody can find out about this or my work here will be ruined, as would your reputation.” Lisa buried her head in her hands as she cried profusely. “Let’s face the truth Lisa, we have committed sin my child and now we are paying the price for it.” Father Harris said softly as he thought for a way to handle the matter. “I know.” Lisa’s voice trembled as she spoke without raising her head “My parents will disown me the moment they find out. We’ll both be excommunicated. How can we find a way out of this mess?” An idea came to Father Harris and he cautiously presented it to Lisa “Perhaps you can go to Italy to study in one of their many convents. I believe I can make the arrangements rather quickly. You’ll stay there until the child is born. When you go into labor they’ll contact me and I’ll rush to be by your side. The child however will need to be put up for adoption before your return home. Nobody here will ever know and you can get on with your life as if it never happened.” Lisa raised her head and said “Adoption?” Father Harris nodded “I’m sorry but it’s the only logical way; otherwise our lives will be ruined. I don’t see that we have any other choice.” Lisa wiped away her tears and asked “What if you left the ministry? We could run off and get married, move somewhere far away from here.” Father Harris looked away. Lisa was barely eighteen and just out of high school. He was a thirty two year old Catholic priest; such a scandal would rock the community. After a moment he replied “Such an abandonment of God’s will for my life would surely bring a curse

upon us both. No, that is not an option.” They sat silent for a few minutes then Lisa stated “I’ll do it. I’ll go to Italy and have the child and return home without it.” Father Harris lowered his head before speaking “Very well, I’ll make the arrangements. Oh, there is one other thing my dear Lisa. After the child is born we shouldn’t see one another again. To do so would bring the same temptations upon us. I for one am too weak to resist such compassion.” Lisa leaned forward and buried her face into his chest. She cried bitterly. Father Harris whispered “I am so sorry I have brought this upon us.” as he embraced her lovingly for what he knew would be for the very last time.

A few days later Father Harris met Lisa at a small diner near the cathedral and discussed the plans he had made. “You’ll be staying at the historical Abbey of Saint Scholastica, also known as Subiaco Abbey. It is within the province of Rome. I understand their midwives are the finest in all of Italy and the facility sits upon the ridge of a beautiful river forge. I can tell your parent’s it is an opportunity of a life time and that they would be foolish to deny you such an educational experience. You’ll be on your way before you start showing and not return until you have your beautiful figure back.” Lisa listened quietly until he was finished then she asked “What will you tell them I am there to study?” Father Harris smiled “Ancient Roman Catholicism and cathedral architecture. The nuns at Saint Scholastica specialize in these studies and many of them speak English. However, it wouldn’t hurt for you to learn a little Italian while you’re there.” The two of them exchanged weak smiles then Lisa spoke with a sad heart “I have a passport but I will need to get a plane ticket. When would they be expecting me?” Father Harris calmly gathered the pamphlets and placed them back into the folder. He gently placed it in her hand as he replied “Within the week. I have already purchased you a plane ticket. Your flight leaves in three days.” Lisa’s eyes grew wide as she realized she didn’t have much time to prepare. Father Harris pulled the plane ticket from the inside pocket of his dress coat and handed it to her. “Aren’t you afraid it will rouse my parent’s suspicion for all of this to suddenly be thrown at them?” Lisa asked with a sense of panic. Father Harris smiled softly as he spoke “Let me handle that. Tell your parent’s I will be dropping by to discuss the matter shortly after dinner tonight. Okay?” Lisa gave Father Harris a weak smile and responded with remorse “Very well then, after dinner tonight.” Lisa gathered up the folder and her purse as they stood. Father Harris placed his hand on Lisa’s shoulder as he spoke “Let me say once more how sorry I am but I feel sure things will turn out

for the better in the long run. Who knows you may fall in love with Italy and decide to stay.” The priest then gave Lisa a forced smile. Lisa nodded and replied “Perhaps, I guess it’s possible. I’ll see you this evening.” The two exchanged an awkward hug then Lisa walked away with tears in her eyes. Things were happening much too fast for her comfort.

“Welcome Father Harris, please come in!” Lonnie Evans joyously greeted the vicar at the front door. “Thank you.” Father Harris replied as he stepped inside. “Lisa told us about her opportunity to study in Italy. We can’t wait to hear more about it.” Lonnie stated as both his wife Betsy and Lisa entered the room. “Yes, well, I’m sorry it’s such short notice but I only found out about it myself a few days ago. I immediately thought of Lisa and felt she would gain so much from such an incredible venture. The bishop has already approved the funding. As I understand it’s a student exchange type of thing. They have a young lady who will be coming to the states to study. Unfortunately, she’ll be in another city and we won’t have the opportunity to meet her. No doubt her family is dealing with the sudden approval of the exchange as well.” Father Harris spun his lies perfectly. He had spent most of the day rehearsing them repeatedly. “It is quite a sudden decision to make.” Betsy stated as they sat down in the formal living room. The Evans had a nice lower middle class home and Lisa was the oldest of their three children. “I agree,” Father Harris continued to sell the couple on sending Lisa to Italy “however, such all expense paid educational opportunities rarely present themselves. You would be foolish to deny her the chance to study abroad, especially in Italy! Keep in mind it’s only for one year and she’ll be studying Ancient Roman Catholicism and cathedral architecture. I personally would love such an opportunity myself; especially knowing it’s in the province of Rome of all places!” Father Harris followed his sales pitch with a broad smile and a chuckle of excitement. Lonnie and Betsy looked at one another with nervous smiles. “Is there any way we can delay her departure?” Betsy asked as she sat wringing her hands with a tissue. “Unfortunately not, their class schedules are much different from here in the United States. Not to mention their rules are much stricter. I guess that’s to be expected from a convent.” Betsy nodded that she understood. Lonnie patted his wife’s hand then faced the priest as he spoke “Our finances simply won’t allow us to visit her during the year and we’re naturally concerned for her well being.” Father Harris smiled and nodded “I understand fully but you have nothing to worry about, she’ll be in a secure convent in a remote area. They’ll take exceptional care of her and I’m sure she’ll write to you often. Am I

right Lisa?” Lisa smiled and nodded as she replied “Of course, yes.” Father Harris asked Lisa for the folder and went over everything with the family. “Do they have internet access?” Lisa asked. Father Harris thought a moment then responded “I’m really not sure but it’s a school so one would think so. If they do then your folks can stay in touch by email, on-line chatting, and that sort of thing. That would certainly be ideal wouldn’t it?” Lisa smiled back as she answered “Yes, it would. I could also keep you informed of my progress.” Father Harris looked at Lonnie then Betsy as he continued “So, shall we say this young lady is destined for international adventure and an education that will be with her for a lifetime?” Lonnie and Betsy nervously smiled at one another then Lonnie replied “Absolutely, we only want the best for our little girl.”

Two days later Father Harris stood with Lonnie and Betsy Evans as they waved goodbye to Lisa. Tears rolled from the parent’s eyes as they watched her boarding her flight. “She’ll have the time of her life.” Father Harris stated with a smile to help comfort the couple. “I know but it’s the first time she’s ever been away from home. We had planned on her attending the local community college and perhaps getting a degree in nursing.” Betsy informed the vicar through her tears. “Nursing, that’s certainly a noble profession. However, what she’ll be studying will put her on the path to being a college professor here in the states, if that is what she wishes.” Father Harris knowing added to his series of lies. “Well, the plane is pulling away from the gate now so I guess we should be going.” Lonnie said as he took his wife’s hand. “Try not to worry. I’ve given her instructions to call you two as soon as she arrives at the convent.” Father Harris stated as he shook Lonnie’s hand. Father Harris quickly left and returned to his car. As soon as he sat down in the driver’s seat he sighed heavily. He softly stated “Whew, finally.” as he turned the key in the ignition. The drive back to the cathedral left the priest with mixed emotions, mostly that of guilt. He had embezzled the church’s money to send her away in order to hide his sin. He had fixed the books to cover up the expense but there was another matter that troubled him more. He had convinced her to put the child up for adoption and keep everything secret. It was such a selfish thing to do. This whole mess was his fault and he knew it. He knew better than to have gotten himself involved with an underage girl. Time after time they had made love in the church office and not once had he used protection. He didn’t use it because the church frowned on such matters. “I’m so damned stupid!” he finally shouted in rage at himself as he drove down the highway. He arrived at the cathedral a short while later. As he walked into the office the church

secretary cheerfully greeted him. “Hello vicar, I’ve just finished sorting the mail and placed several items on your desk. The phone has been quiet for the most part and Mark the custodian is requesting funds to repair the hand railing at the east side entrance.” Father Harris forced a smile as he replied “Thank you Margaret. How much does Mark think the repairs will cost?” Margaret stopped what she was doing and replied “I placed it on your desk. If I recall correctly it was a little over three hundred dollars. He said it was going to require some masonry work as well as new iron railing.” Father Harris nodded and said “Very well, I’ll take care of it. Any emails I need to know about?” Margaret answered “Not today, just more spam. Oh, speaking of spam. Have you had lunch? I can order you something if you’d like.” The weary priest responded “No thank you. I’m really not hungry. Maybe I’ll grab something later.” He removed his jacket while heading for his desk. “Very well,” Margaret stated “I’ll see you Thursday morning.” Father Harris threw up his hand and replied “Thank you Margaret, you’re a sweetheart.” The woman was a volunteer that came in every Tuesday and Thursday morning at eight o’clock sharp. She was a cheerful individual and her attention to details was beyond expectations. Father Harris kept her out of the church financials and now he was glad he did. Hiding thousands of dollars in the record books of a church with a declining attendance was going to be difficult enough. He didn’t need anyone looking over his shoulder, especially someone as smart as Margaret. Not just that, he hadn’t received approval from Bishop Valero on the matter. It was all kept secret.

Father Harris smiled as he read Lisa’s email. He had given her his personal email address to be sure that only he would view their correspondence with one another. Lisa had been gone for nearly six weeks and he hated to admit it but he missed her warm embrace. In her email she informed him that she was beginning to show. The nuns had assured her that her pregnancy would be kept a private matter and that they would be there for her every step of the way. Her classes were going well and she had already been on a field trip to some of the oldest standing cathedrals in and around Rome. It was clear to him that she was enjoying her studies. This made him feel better about sending her away but his sense of guilt was never far away. “Vicar, the auditor is here. Shall I send him in?” Margaret asked as she stood in the doorway to his office. “Yes, of course.” He replied as he closed up the email and pulled up the church’s financial records. This was his first audit since embezzling the money to send Lisa to Italy. He felt he had covered his trail quite well with fake receipts, many of them for donations to community funds

that helped the needy within the community. With the local economy tumbling many food and clothing shelters had been overwhelmed and were asking for larger donations from the churches that supported them. The auditor was assigned from the Bishop's office and they were always meticulous. After hours of going over the church's finances the auditor approved but ended the audit with a warning "Father Harris, although the economy is suffering and many are in great need you can't continue donations of this magnitude. Your contributions are slowly failing as is your attendance. Your primary focus should be on building the church. Next quarter I hope to see some improvement." Father Harris thanked him and saw him to the door. Once the auditor was gone he sat down heavily at his desk. Margaret had already left for the day so he pulled his flask from the bottom drawer and turned it up. His drinking had been gradually increasing ever since the day he had bid farewell to Lisa.

Weeks turned to months and Lisa faithfully continued to stay in touch with her parents and Father Harris. With each passing day the priest found himself regretting his actions more and more. His drinking was beginning to get out of hand and he knew it. One day the phone rang just as he was leaving to go to his small apartment at the back of the cathedral complex. He quickly answered "Father Frederic Harris speaking." There was a bit of static on the line then the caller spoke with a broken accent "Father Harris this is Sister Monet from Saint Scholastica." Father Harris was surprised to be hearing from the convent since Lisa wasn't due for several months. "Yes, how may I help you?" he replied. There was another sizzle of static on the line. "Father Harris, I'm calling in regards to Lisa Evans. Recent ultra-sound test are revealing some abnormalities in the child's development. Since we are forbidden to contact her parents we were wondering if you could speak with her in regards to the complications involved with her pregnancy." The nun informed him. "Yes, of course. Is she there with you now?" he asked. "Yes sir. I'm going to give the phone to her." The nun replied. "Frederic! They want me to terminate my pregnancy!" Lisa's voice shouted into the phone. "Calm down Lisa. Tell me what's wrong." Father Harris insisted. "Well, the ultra-sound is showing unusual deformities with the baby's hands and feet. They even tell me the child's chances of survival are slim and that child birth may put my own life in jeopardy." She exclaimed. "Well Lisa, how do you feel? Are you healthy?" he asked with concern. "I'm fine and I feel like the baby will be fine but they're pressuring me." Lisa replied in tears. "Lisa, listen to me. Okay? Are you listening?" Father

Harris attempted to calm her. "Okay, yeah." Lisa replied after a moment to gather herself. "They are only making recommendations and informing you of the risk. Whatever you decide will be the final say. However, listen to what they are telling you." the vicar spoke calmly into the phone. "It's my baby. I'm not going to kill it." Lisa tearfully cried into the phone. "Okay, please give the phone back to Sister Monet. Let me speak with her." Father Harris instructed Lisa as his heart pounded in his chest. "Yes Father Harris?" Sister Monet's stern voice came from the receiver followed by more static. The priest knew that the situation had to be extremely grim for nuns to be recommending termination of a pregnancy! He took a deep breath then inquired for details "Lisa of course has the final say on the matter but tell me how bad the deformities are." A moment of static filled the vicar's ears then Sister Monet's voice began to explain "The child's appendages are grotesquely exaggerated. The boy's fingers and feet are elongated which could make child birth impossible. There is a sixty percent chance either the child or the mother could die during the birthing process, if not both. Also, the child's size is larger than it should be at this stage. We think she could go into labor within the next couple of months." Father Harris carefully listened then asked "Is it possible the deformities can be surgically corrected after birth?" he asked. He could hear a moment of discussion with someone else on the other end then the nun replied "Perhaps but we are more concerned for Ms. Lisa's life." The priest closed his eyes and thought about what a mess it would be for Lisa to die during child birth in a foreign country. Another thought then struck his mind, it was his child too. His eyes filled with tears as he finally spoke into the phone "If she still wishes to see this through then that is what you should do. She can deal with the child's deformities and what it will take to correct them after the child is born. Be sure to call me when she first goes into labor and I'll book a flight. Hopefully I can be there in time for the birth. Do what you must to keep her calm and please respect her wishes." After a moment of silence Sister Monet responded "Very well, it is not recommended due to the high risk of death but we will honor her decision." Father Harris placed the receiver back into its cradle and sat back down at his desk. "Oh dear Lord, what have I gotten myself into?" he asked aloud as he looked upward. He was overcome by an overwhelming sense of dread.

In the days that followed Father Harris often found himself on the verge of tears. Lisa was putting herself at great risk for a child she couldn't keep, their child. Furthermore a deformed

child's chances of adoption in today's society were slim to none. "Are you okay?" Margaret asked as she brought a cup of coffee to the vicar and sat it down on the corner of his desk. "No, not really." He replied with despair. "If you care to talk about it I'm here for you." she responded as she stood still a moment to see how he would react. Father Harris took a deep breath and sighed "No, perhaps it would be better if... yes, yes I would. Please have a seat." Margaret sat down and waited patiently for the vicar to speak. After a moment to decide what to tell and what not to tell he began "Margaret, I've been informed of a young lady who is far along in her pregnancy. They have discovered complications that could result in the mother's death or perhaps that of the child. Quite possibly it could result in the death of both. It deeply troubles me." Margaret paused before speaking then replied "Being the man of God that you are, it is only right that such a tragedy should trouble you. However you are always telling us to put our faith in God, to trust him in such complex matters. Perhaps it is time for you to place the matter in our heavenly father's hands." Father Harris looked up at Margaret through teary eyes. After a moment of contemplation he responded softly "Yes, I do need to heed my own words. After all, this matter will certainly turn out according to God's will and not mine." He then smiled and said "Thank you. I needed to hear that." Margaret smiled as she stood and headed for the door. "Would you care to join me for lunch?" the priest inquired of his secretary before she could leave the room. "Maybe, what do you have in mind?" she replied as she turned back to face him. Father Harris smiled as he sat forward in his chair. With a lift in his voice he answered "Chef Jung's Chinese Dynasty!" Margaret smiled; it was one of her favorite restaurants. "I'll grab my sweater!" she cheerfully replied. The weeks that followed went smoothly. Father Harris slowed down on his drinking but Lisa's well being and that of her child's was never far from his mind. Day after day he did his best to think positive and he prayed fervently over the matter.

It was early on a cold winter morning when the phone rang. "Hello" Father Harris answered as he sat up on the side of his bed. There was a soft sizzling of static on the line. "Father Harris?" the caller inquired. "Yes, speaking." He replied. A brief moment of static followed. "This is Sister Monet, It is time. Lisa's water has broken and she is going into labor." The nun informed the sleepy priest. "I'm on my way!" Father Harris replied as he suddenly found himself wide awake. After a quick shower and getting dressed he grabbed his already prepared suitcase and headed for his office. He went on-line and quickly booked the first flight to Italy and left a note

for Margaret. In the note he simply stated “Called to Italy on an urgent matter. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Father Andréa will be covering for me.” He then called and left a message for Father Andréa, the retired clergyman who had agreed to fill in for him.

The plane flight was long and tiring with one short stop over but it finally reached the airport in Rome. After picking up his luggage Father Harris rushed to get a cab and was soon on his way to the convent. He marveled at the beautiful setting of the historical Abbey of Saint Scholastica. It seemed timeless. As the cab dropped him off two nuns rushed out to greet him. “Is the child here yet?” the priest urgently requested. Luckily one of the nuns spoke English “No, not yet. You must be Father Harris, yes?” The vicar tipped his hat as he replied “Yes, it is I.” The nun instructed him to follow and soon they were moving through ancient hallways which were accented with a few modern updates, such as electricity and plumbing. He could hear Lisa crying out before they ever reached the birthing room. He rushed in and took her hand in his “I’m here Lisa, I’m right here.” The vicar nervously stated. Lisa replied in a slightly delirious state of mind “Father Harris, how kind of you to come.” He smiled as he looked into her eyes. It was obvious she was in a lot of pain. Her labor was proving to be a very difficult one. “Everything will be okay, hang in there. God will help you.” he attempted to encourage her. Hours later after hearing Lisa often screaming in agony one of the nuns took hold of the vicar’s arm. With a nod of her head and a gentle pull on his arm she let him know it was time for him to leave the room. He stepped into the hallway and bowed his head in prayer as Lisa’s yelling echoed down the hallway. The door closed and Lisa’s agonizing screams were now muffled behind the thick wooden door. Nearly two hour later a nun came out and led him to a small room. “Sit.” She said. “Is Lisa okay?” he asked her. “Sit.” She repeated. Father Harris then realized her English was limited to a few words. The room had a small desk and chair to one side and a short handcrafted pew across from it. He removed his jacket and draped it over the back of the pew as the nun rushed away. He sat down and placed his hat down in the seat of the pew beside of him. The hallway was quiet now with the exception of nuns giving orders and the occasional clanging of metal pans. He wasn’t sure how long he had sat there but a nun finally came into the room. She went directly to the seat behind the desk before looking at him. “I am Sister Monet, we have spoken in past, yes?” she stated in broken English. “Yes, it is good to finally meet you.” he responded as he studied her face for some clue as to Lisa’s well being. The nun glared sternly

into the vicar's eyes as she spoke "Lisa is extremely weak, she lost much blood. We have her resting and if she lives you may see her tomorrow morning. Now, we must discuss the child." Father Harris nodded as he replied "Yes, how is the child?" A look of grave concern came over the nun's face before she answered "Once this child is cleaned up you will see for yourself. I tell you now; you will not like what you will see." The nun continued in her broken English. "Tell me this," Father Harris insisted "other than his deformities is he healthy?" The nun clutched the cross that hung around her neck as she responded to his question "Yes, apparently so, however, it would have been best had the child died." Father Harris sat back in shock at hearing the nun's words. He was speechless. How could a woman with such religious conviction say such a harsh thing? "Now," the nun bluntly continued "such a child is certainly not adoptable. So tell me who will take the child and care for it?" The priest was stunned and unprepared for such a revelation. After a moment to gather his thoughts he replied to the waiting nun "The father is unknown so I guess I will take charge of the child for now. Lisa's parents are members of my parish and not prepared financially to travel here to take the child." Sister Monet stared at him sternly then asked "Do you think you are prepared to care for a special needs child?" He tilted his head as he felt contempt for the nun's lack of compassion "I will acquire assistance as needed. The child will be taken back to the states and medical attention will be given a priority." She closed her lips tightly for a moment as if stopping herself from saying something she shouldn't say. After a moment she coldly stated "I will need some information for the birth certificate. You may take the child as soon as two days. I strongly suggest you speak with the mother regarding the child rather than us. If she lives she should awaken by morning." Another nun appeared in the doorway and nodded to Sister Monet. "Well Father Harris, if you will follow me you shall see this child. I strongly suggest you prepare yourself." As he stood to follow the nun Father Harris began to calm himself for what was obviously going to be an emotional matter. He couldn't imagine what was so wrong with the child that it had all the nuns upset.

The priest followed the nun into a small nursery. Once in the room the other nuns quickly departed. Father Harris stepped over to the crib and looked down. The child was wrapped in a soft blue blanket. What little he could see of its sweet pink face was so angelic. The blanket covered the baby boy's eyes as well as his entire head. Father Harris thought it was a rather large baby for a new born but that wasn't all that unusual. Sister Monet then stepped forward and

pulled the blanket away from the child's head. Father Harris stared in pure shock. The stern nun then pulled back the blanket to expose the baby's body. Tears immediately filled the eyes of the priest as fear gripped his heart. "No." he gasped in a whisper as his body began to tremble. Father Harris studied the infant more closely. The skin on the child's head looked like large patches of thin scales. The scales ran down each side of its neck then down onto its shoulder's and chest. The infant's ears were pointed in a rather exaggerated manner. The child's arms were abnormally long with strange hands. The forefingers and thumbs were thick and over sized. The other fingers were greatly exaggerated, long and pointing downward with webbing between them. The webbing continued until it connected just below the child's shoulder blades. The priest thought to himself "*They look like some sort of wings.*" The baby's abdomen appeared normal as did the boy's genitalia. The priest slowly moved his eyes down the child's scale covered legs to its feet. They appeared to be more like claws on short feet which then arched upward to the heels. The heels themselves resembled talons. As he studied them he saw something move from behind one of the infant's legs. It slowly curled out and wrapped around one of its legs. It was a tail! Father Harris stared down in shock and disbelief. The child then opened his eyes and the priest abruptly jumped back. The infant's eyes were green and the pupils were like that of a serpent! "It looks like a demon, yes?" Sister Monet coldly stated. "Don't say that!" Father Harris snapped angrily at her. Sister Monet stepped forward and began to cover the child in the blanket as she spoke "As I said, it would have been best had the child died." Father Harris turned away and stared at the wall as he spoke "I'll take him back with me to the states and find the finest doctor's available. Surely there is something that can be done." Sister Monet replied in her broken English "You fix him, yes? Then he grows up and his mind is that of what you now see. You fix that too? No, I think not!" Father Harris didn't answer. After a moment he finally broke his silence "I will speak with Lisa in the morning about the child. I think it best you restrain her so she can't get up and go looking for her baby." He then turned and walked out. Sister Monet gave him a cold stare as he left the nursery.

The following morning Father Harris walked into Lisa's room. She was mildly sedated and restrained. "Frederic, why have they tied me down?" she asked as she pulled at her arm restraints. "You are medicated. That will keep you from trying to get up. If you get up you will just fall down, maybe even hurt yourself." The priest kindly explained. "I want to see my baby.

Why won't they let me see my baby?" She whined. Father Harris stroked her hair back from her face and replied "My dear Lisa, the child is in bad condition. If you recall they warned you of the risk. I will be rushing the child to the states for advanced medical care late tomorrow. There is a very strong chance he will not survive. So, I must hurry and find help for him." Lisa's eyes filled with tears as she responded "What's wrong with him? I want to see!" she suddenly shouted as she struggled against her restraints as well as the medication. Father Harris placed his hand on her cheek and replied "Lisa, no, they can't remove him from the machines and you can't get up right now. You are lucky to be alive yourself." Again he was lying, one lie to cover another lie, he had told such a long series of lies since the day Lisa told him she was pregnant. With tears in his eyes he sat quietly by Lisa's bed as she drifted into a drug induced sleep.

Lisa awoke later in the afternoon and looked up at Father Harris. He noticed she had awoken and leaned forward. "Tell me the truth. My baby died, didn't he?" Lisa asked softly. Father Harris saw the opportunity to separate Lisa from the child. So he took advantage of the situation and replied "Yes, my child. It was simply not meant to be." Lisa cried softly as Father Harris regretted telling the mother of his child yet another lie. "*Maybe it will die. I hope it does.*" He thought to himself as regret filled his heart. "Father Harris, Mother Celina wishes to speak with you." a nun requested from the doorway. "Mother Celina?" Father Harris inquired, not having heard the name since his arrival. "Yes, she is the school dean." The nun informed him. Father Harris looked down at Lisa who was still crying "Dear one, I must go for now but I will be back." The priest then followed the nun out of the medical ward and across campus to the dean's office. A short time later he was sitting across the desk from Mother Celina. "We have concerns regarding Lisa's education. Although she has done well, there is a question of how this tragic child birth will affect her ability to focus on her studies." The nun stated calmly. Father Harris quickly interjected "She'll be fine. I have told her the child has died, most likely it will. The deformities are quite extensive. Once I am gone and she is back on her feet I'm certain she'll focus on her studies. It will help take her mind off of the child. She's stronger than you might think." Mother Celina glared at the priest before speaking "Lying is not a trait expected in a priest of your status. However, according to what I've heard about this birth, perhaps thinking it has died would be best for her. I'll keep an eye on Lisa and if her grades begin to decline I will be in touch. That is all." Father Harris stood and thanked her. He had expected a much longer

meeting. After leaving the administration building he made his way into the gardens. It was so peaceful there. He sat down on a bench with a weary heart. Lisa's baby, his son, was a living nightmare. Exactly what he really intended to do with the child he had not yet contemplated, perhaps kill it? The very idea of taking the baby to a doctor to discuss corrective surgery was disturbing in and of itself. One thing Sister Monet had said was true; the child did look like a demon. If his superiors at the Vatican ever found out they would surely send someone to kill it. He would then be excommunicated for being in league with the devil. "This is all so freaking insane!" the priest spat through tightly clenched teeth. He quickly looked around to see if anyone may have overheard him but he was alone. He could only hear the sound of birds. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks. After calming himself he got up and headed back to Lisa's room. They spoke about several matters but neither of them mentioned the child. As he prepared to depart Lisa asked "I'm assuming you will handle the details of Luke's burial." Father Harris turned around and with a weak smile and replied "The matter has already been taken care of, you need not be concerned. Your parents will not find out. Just focus on getting stronger and getting back to your studies. In time your heart will mend." She didn't respond but forced a smile and nodded. As the priest walked down the hallway he encountered Sister Monet. He stopped and spoke with her. "So, she named the boy Luke. I actually never thought to ask her. It's a nice name, derived from the ancient Latin name of Lucius, meaning light." Sister Monet's stern face replied "Well, she did refer to the child as Luke; however, the full name given for the birth certificate was Adam Lucius Evans." Sister Monet then gave the priest a 'know it all' smirk. Father Harris smiled and simply replied "Odd." The nun tilted her head and inquired "How so?" The priest responded with a blank expression "Adam, meaning first and Lucius meaning light, first light." The nun's eye brows went up as her mouth sagged slightly open. "Have a good evening." Father Harris said as he placed his hat on his head and continued on his way back to his room.

By noon the next day Sister Monet handed Father Harris a copy of Luke's birth certificate as another nun wheeled a small carriage into the room containing the child. Sister Monet then firmly stated "If you would please be on your way and take that abomination with you." She then turned on her heel and rushed down the hallway. After putting the child's birth certificate in his pocket, Father Harris took the child from the carriage and placed it in a car seat that the abbey had provided. He then gathered up a travel bag of diapers, wipes, and formula that had been

prepared for him. The attending nun then asked “Sir, if I may ask. What is your relation to the child?” Father Harris turned red in the face as he yet again covered the truth “None, just taking care of matters for the family.” He quickly left the building and stood in front of the complex as he waited for his cab. Less than fifty feet from him was the river ravine. The thought of slinging the child over the edge crossed his mind but instead he burst into tears. He couldn’t do it. It wasn’t the child’s fault it was horrid in its appearance. The fault was his. He was certain he was being punished by God for his acts of fornication. Adding murder to his growing list of sins would only make things worse. The priest wept uncontrollably until the cab arrived. A short time later they arrived at the airport.

On the flight home Luke was quiet. Even when awake he didn’t make a fuss or cry. Father Harris kept him covered well and avoided letting people view the child. Fortunately the flight was only half full and many of them got off when they stopped over in London. The remainder of the flight was quiet and night was soon upon them. The priest fed Luke a bottle of formula and burped him without having to hide. All the seats around them were empty. As they got closer to the United States Father Harris lifted the blanket from Luke’s head and found the child to be awake. His large green eyes sparkled beneath the small spotlight overhead. “There is certainly no sign of malice in your eyes, all I see is contentment.” The priest muttered softly as he studied his son’s face. As much as the vicar had wanted to be rid of the child his heart was beginning to change. The child’s sweet face and good nature was too charming to deny. “Sister Monet is wrong about you little one.” he whispered to the child. He gently covered Luke’s eyes and softly said “Now get some sleep. We still have a long night ahead of us.” He then laid his own head back and for the first time in months his heart was not heavy. The concerns and frustrations that had been building for so long seemed to drift away. “We are approaching Chicago O’Hare with an ETA of fifteen minutes.” The pilot’s voice boomed over the speaker. Father Harris woke up and immediately checked on Luke. The child was sleeping softly, undisturbed by the cabin announcement. The sky was getting lighter as morning approached.

Father Harris made his way into the church pulling his luggage and carrying little Luke in his car seat. He looked at the clock as he entered his office then subconsciously said “Oh geez, look at the time Luke.” The clock was showing six twenty two a.m. Wednesday. “My goodness son,

look at all that stuff on my desk!” he exclaimed. It dawned on him that he was speaking to an infant but he didn’t care. “You know what, that can wait. Let’s get you changed and fed. We’ll grab a little nap then later I’ll call the local abbey and see if they can send us a nice lady to help look after you, okay? Okay!” he rambled on as he prepared to change Luke’s diaper. As he powdered the infant’s bottom the vicar felt something wrap around his wrist, it was Luke’s tail. “Okay kid, you need to get that thing under control.” He mumbled as he pulled himself free of the strange appendage. He knew it should trouble him far more than it did but for reasons he couldn’t explain, it didn’t. “Okay Luke, I guess I’ll need to pick you out a room. I’m thinking perhaps one of the rooms near my apartment. There’s a nice little room beneath the bell tower that has its own bathroom. When you grow up that would be nice, don’t you think?” The vicar softly muttered as he wrapped the child up in the soft blue blanket.

CHAPTER TWO

All God's Creatures, Great and Small

The vicar woke from his nap and checked on the child. After a diaper change and a bottle he made a call to the Abbey. Luke lay quietly in the car seat on the office sofa as Father Harris worked. The abbey said they had someone they thought would be perfect and they would send her for an interview that very day. By mid afternoon the priest had nearly cleared his desk with no problems from Luke. "You sure are a quiet one." The vicar stated as he looked over at his son. "Hello, I'm Sister Elizabeth Keifer, from the abbey." A sweet voice caught Father Harris by surprise. "Oh hello, I'm Father Harris." He said as he stood. "Is this the little one?" she asked as she stepped inside the office. Father Harris quickly stepped into her path and said "Yes, but let's talk first shall we?" he directed her to the chair across from his desk. Upon being seated he proceeded with the interview. "Well, first of all, you need to understand that this is a special needs child. Luke has multiple deformities in his limbs as well as other complicated matters. He is however very quiet and calm. Not very fussy and personally I don't think I've yet to hear him cry." Sister Elizabeth's raised her eye brows as she said "That's highly unusual for a new born." Father Harris smiled and replied "Yes, it is. Now, the position is full time and housing will be provided. We have a small guest cottage at the back of the cathedral grounds. The child's education will eventually come into play but we can discuss that at a much later time." Sister Elizabeth nodded that she was okay with those things. "Now, most importantly, the child must be kept secret from those outside these walls. I was called to Italy and entrusted to keep him safe and his location secret. There are those overseas and possibly here in the states that may wish the child harm. When he comes of age Cardinal McKinley will send for him." Again Father Harris was lying but he needed a reason for the child's secrecy. Although he did worry that Sister Monet at the convent may speak with those at the Vatican. It would be a conversation that could lead to a visit from Cardinal McKinley. They could even send Vatican guards to end the child's life. "Oh my, who in this world would dare harm a new born?" Sister Elizabeth asked with surprise. Father Harris was ready for the question "Such people would be those that do not know the love of Christ. They are people who judge by what they see and not by the compassion of the Holy Spirit." The nun nodded but the look on her face revealed she had concerns. "What is the

child's name?" she asked as she looked in the infant's direction. Father Harris responded "Adam Lucius, but I call him Luke. His name means first light." Sister Elizabeth nodded then asked "What about his last name?" Father Harris quickly replied "That I can not reveal to you or anyone else at this time, please understand." With a gentle smile she said "I understand this is a very unusual case. Perhaps even a difficult one. May I see the child before making my decision?" Father Harris stood and led the nun over to Luke. "Please look upon him with your heart, not your mind." He then pulled the blanket off of Luke's head. The nun didn't seem at all phased. Luke opened his eyes and she slightly flinched. Slowly the vicar pulled the blanket from over the child's body. The nun gasped and turned away. "I'm sorry but as I said he has many deformities." Father Harris stated softly as he covered Luke's face up once more. Sister Elizabeth clutched her cross and bowed her head. Father Harris remained silent and waited for the nun's response. After what seemed like a lengthy pause she slowly turned around. "Are you certain this child was born of a human?" she asked calmly. Father Harris replied "Yes, both father and mother were human and Christian. The cause of the abnormalities is completely unknown. It is a most unfortunate matter." She turned back around and looked down at the child. She then slowly pulled the blanket off of Luke's head again and looked into his eyes. Her hand rested on the side of the car seat. A second later Luke's tail was curved over her wrist. She didn't pull away or act startled as she softly spoke "I can't say exactly why I am compelled to care for this, this child, but I will do my best to see that he is safe. In time it is my prayer that he comes to know the love of Christ." Father Harris smiled with relief as he spoke "The abbey highly recommended you. Now I see why. The love of God is certainly within you."

Sister Elizabeth arrived the following morning and began making a list of what she would need for the nursery. An upper room of the church was selected. It was just below the bell tower with beautiful stained glass windows and doors that led out onto a small balcony at the front of the church. The stairs that lead to the room were located a short distance down the hall from father Harris' small apartment. Father Harris gave the nun his personal credit card and sent Margaret with her to get the items she required. Margaret was puzzled and confused by the sudden appearance of a baby in the church but the vicar promised to tell her all about it at a later time. The caretaker Mark and the housekeeper Angelina worked together to clean and prepare the room. They then moved a bed in for Sister Elizabeth. When the child got older they would have

the small cottage ready for her to move into. Everyone pitched in to carry all the items that the nun had purchased for the nursery. Margaret stayed late and helped the nun to set the room up. During all the commotion Father Harris kept Luke in his office with him. When Luke was in need of a diaper change or hungry he made a small fuss but he never cried. Upon receiving attention he immediately calmed down. Father Harris never had another thought of the child dying. He wanted it to live but nobody must ever know that it was his son. As disfigured as the child was it was his flesh and blood, his responsibility. The vicar very much regretted it but Lisa could never know that the child survived. It would only bring her heartache and open old wounds, wounds that would reveal the hypocrite that he had been. Lisa would hate him for it. Perhaps she hated him now. She had a life ahead of her that didn't need the complications that Luke would bring. It was his prayer that time would mend her broken heart.

Father Harris worked hard to grow his small flock. The larger churches within the city had taken many of the Catholic faith from the eastern side of the city. With fewer than two hundred attending Sunday Mass the old historic church had little to offer the community. They had no day care or nursery school, only a limited youth program, and no money to start such programs. The vicar had woven the expense of Luke's caretaker into the youth fund in order to hide it. Sister Elizabeth's presence was vital for the child. She seemed reluctant in her duties on many days but she faithfully executed them none the less. Father Harris suspected that the nun was repulsed by the child's appearance but who could blame her. Although Luke was a good infant it didn't change the fact that he appeared to be the offspring of some fictitious monster. "Father Harris, may I have a moment?" Margaret asked as she stepped just inside his office. "Why yes Margaret, what's on your mind?" he replied with a smile. "Well sir," she began nervously "I've just been informed that Lisa Evans is returning home. Her father told me that she has been accepted at Texas State in their architecture program. Therefore he is seeking relocation to his company's facility in Dallas to be closer to her. It seems the entire Evans family will be leaving us sir." Father Harris placed his elbows on his desk then buried his face into his hands. "Oh my, it seems we are losing members almost monthly. At this rate we'll have to close the doors within a couple of years." Margaret sadly responded "Well, I just thought you should know but let's not talk about closing the doors just yet. Surely God will answer our prayers." The priest looked up

at her with a weary smile and replied “You’re right as usual Margaret, surely God will answer our prayers.”

“Sister Elizabeth, sorry to intrude but I was wondering how things are going?” Father Harris asked as he stepped into the nursery and found the nun holding Luke in a rocking chair and singing to him. The stained glass doors were standing open allowing the sun to warm the room. It was a beautiful spring day. “All is well Father Harris. As you can see little Luke is growing like a weed. He eats well but strained broccoli is not among his favorites. Also, his eyes are quite sensitive to light so I must keep them covered when the doors are open during the day.” She replied with a smile. “Yes, he is growing and he seems to enjoy your singing. I was wondering if you or the child had need of anything?” the vicar enquired as he stepped closer. “Nothing I can think of at the moment. Would you care to hold him a minute?” she asked. Father Harris stepped back as he replied “No, I merely stopped by to check on how things were progressing.” Sister Elizabeth stood with the child and said “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean it that way. Would you hold him a moment while I show you something I discovered?” Father Harris extended his arms as he spoke “Oh, yes of course.” Upon turning Luke over to the vicar she turned and started a music CD of hymns on an old player she had brought with her. When the music started Sister Elizabeth stood watching the priest and the child. Luke began to gently sway to the music. Father Harris smiled with delight. “Isn’t that amazing, his movements are in perfect sync with the music?” she asked. “Yes, they are and he’s less than six months old!” The priest exclaimed with delight. “While you have him I need to make a quick visit to the ladies room.” Sister Elizabeth stated as she turned toward the door. “Of course, take your time.” Father Harris replied as he lifted the blanket off of Luke’s head and watched him moving to the music. “That is fascinating.” He whispered to himself as the child’s swaying mesmerized him. The sun had now dropped below the skyline of the high rise buildings in the distance, casting a shadow over the neighborhood. Father Harris carefully stepped out onto the balcony with Luke in his arms. “What a spectacular view you have from up here.” He said to Luke knowing the child had no idea what he was saying. “Pthhh!” Luke made a sound as bubbles formed on his lips. “Well don’t be like that. You have one of the finest views of the city from this balcony. It overlooks the river district. I can even see part of the river just past the Wrigley Building.” Luke’s green eyes sparkled as a smile came to his face. “Yes little man, it is quite nice and you know what? I think Sister Elizabeth has

taken a liking to you. That's a good thing, don't you think?" Father Harris spoke softly to his son while watching the streets below. People were going in and out of the market and small shops. A look of distaste came across his face as he saw far too many going into the liquor store just a block away. He had stopped drinking completely after Luke had come into his life. A sharp mind was needed at all times should anything happen that may jeopardize the child's safety. The music disk had ended and Father Harris could hear Sister Elizabeth footsteps on the stairway leading up to the nursery. Slowly he turned around and started back inside just as she entered the room. "I was just showing Luke what an incredible view he has from his balcony." He stated as he held his son out for the nun. After taking him into her arms she immediately covered his head with the blanket. "Well, I guess I should be going." The vicar softly commented as he started for the door. It was then he noticed near the corner a portable sewing machine and bolts of fabric standing upright in the corner of the room. "I didn't know you were a seamstress." He stated as he spotted something she had been working on lying in the chair. "I'm not much of one but it gives me something to work on while Luke is sleeping. He'll be needing clothes and I doubt the stores would have anything that would comfortably fit him. He can't remain a child in swaddling clothes much longer. At least not at the rate he's growing. If you'll stop by tomorrow afternoon I should have something ready for him to model for you." she said with a sense of pride in her work. "Okay, I'll do that. I'm looking forward to seeing what you've come up with." He replied with a smile before turning to leave. "Good evening Father." The nun stated as the priest pulled the door closed behind him. "Well now little Luke, it would appear you need a diaper change. I just caught a rather fowl scent of broccoli." She kindly spoke to the child as she laid him on the changing table.

The following evening Father Harris entered the nursery "Good evening everyone!" he cheerfully called out as he closed the door behind him. Sister Elizabeth turned around and held Luke up to show the priest his new clothes. "Oh, I love it!" Father Harris declared with a gasp. The vicar's eyes studied the small hooded tunic that covered his son. Sister Elizabeth had even made a soft dark red fabric cross that hung down from around the child's neck. The sleeves were long to cover his deformed hands and the hood was slightly over sized to cover his eyes. "You are quite the talented nun." The priest stated as he walked over to examine the tunic more closely. He lifted one sleeve and looked into it. "You've even made soft ties to hold his, well, his

fingers up under his arms, how clever. I like the knee length leggings as well.” Father Harris marveled. “I’ve also made ties to restrain his tail.” The nun informed the priest. Father Harris then lifted the hood to discover that the boy’s head was covered with a head dress like the nuns wear; only it was brown to match the tunic. “You are a genius!” Father Harris stated as a big smile covered his face. “Don’t you think so Luke?” he playfully asked the child. “Da goo dab!” Luke responded. Father Harris and Sister Elizabeth both chuckled. “I think he likes it too.” Father Harris commented. Sister Elizabeth sat Luke down on the rug and said “He has something else to show you. He surprised me with it this morning.” No sooner had the nun stood up straight Luke used his hands to push himself up onto his feet. He stood in place and held his arms out as he sputtered and cooed. He then surprised them both by taking several steps toward them, before falling back on his bottom. “He’s walking?” Father Harris remarked with surprise. “Actually that was the first time; he only stood for me earlier today. The thing that really gets me is that he’s never made any effort to crawl over the past few months.” The nun responded just as surprised as the priest was. “Isn’t that something? Walking before he can crawl.” Father Harris marveled. Sister Elizabeth sat down in the rocking chair and called to the child with her arms extended “Luke, come to me, come.” At first he just sat there as Father Harris walked away and stood near the nun. Luke then pushed himself up to his feet and cautiously began to walk. “Look at you move, Friar Luke!” the vicar chuckled. Sister Elizabeth laughed “Oh my, he does look like a dwarf monk!” They both laughed as Luke made it to the nun’s chair and grabbed on.

Father Harris struggled with his budget for the coming year. More families had left the parish over the past few months. Many left in search of job opportunities, the local economy was dropping which resulted in several factory layoffs. “Things are not looking good.” The vicar stated to Margaret as he printed out his proposed budget. “Not at the moment but I’m sure the good Lord will provide.” Margaret responded as she placed the printouts in a folder. Sister Elizabeth appeared in the door. “Ah, Sister, what can we do for you?” Father Harris cheerfully greeted her. “Perhaps it may be what I can do for you.” she replied. “How so?” the vicar responded with surprise. “I know you’ve been working on the budget and I just overheard you say that things are not good. Perhaps special singing at Mass each Sunday would inspire people to attend more faithfully. I’m not a professional by any means but I’m willing to give of my

limited talent to see if it would help matters.” She offered. “Yes, that may help. I’d be delighted if you would do that for us.” The priest replied. “Wonderful!” Margaret commented.

Each Sunday during Mass Sister Elizabeth sang a special song just before Father Harris spoke. After a few weeks attendance slightly improved as did the tithes and offerings. “I can’t say how much we appreciate your singing.” Margaret complimented Sister Elizabeth one Sunday following the service. “Thank you, you are too kind.” The nun replied. “Perhaps we’re not kind enough.” Father Harris stated as he walked up to them. “I’m just glad things have stabilized a bit for the church. I know you two have been worried for some time.” Sister Elizabeth replied. Margaret looked around then turned back “Mike is waiting on me. I’d better get going.” She said with a smile before leaving. Father Harris then turned to the nun “You have been a God send Sister Elizabeth, not just for Luke but for all of us. Thank you so much for all you do, may your faithfulness be blessed of God.” The nun smiled and gave a gracious bow before turning to leave. She hurried back to the nursery and found Luke still sleeping.

Financial matters remained stable and a new family joined the assembly in the months that followed. They were a Hispanic couple that had moved into an apartment nearby. Mister Nicolas Martinez and his wife Sofia had four small children between the ages of five and nine. There were two girls Camila and Valentina. The two older were boys, Martin and Benjamin. They were faithful to the church and the choir leader was soon able to get their children involved in a youth chorus with the other children in the church. Father Harris began rotating Sister Elizabeth’s special singing with that of the youth chorus each week. Much to the vicar’s delight attendance gradually began to climb.

Luke continued to develop and grow. It wasn’t long before he was running around the room playing. “He loves having me sing or read to him.” Sister Elizabeth informed the vicar one evening during his visit. Luke put down his toy and ran over to them “Yes, sing!” he said excitedly. “Not at this moment, Father Harris is visiting.” The nun stated. Luke nodded that he understood and went back to his toys. “I trust he is always this well behaved.” The priest asked as he watched Luke playing. “Always, he is unusually bright and always obedient. Honestly, he’s the most well behaved child I have ever cared for.” Sister Elizabeth stated proudly. “I’m truly

glad to hear it. As you know his appearance would lead one to think he'd be quite the opposite." The priest replied. "Yes, I understand what you're saying." She responded softly as if in deep thought. "Fodda Hawwis?" Luke said softly. "Yes Luke." The vicar answered as he turned around. The boy held up a small blue plastic pterodactyl as the priest stepped closer and knelt down on one knee. "Hab you eber seen an animal like dis one?" Luke asked curiously. "No I haven't, nobody has. Dinosaurs were gone from the Earth long before people were here. "Oh, that's too bad." Luke replied sadly. The priest remained silent. "How bout a j-raf?" Luke then asked as he held up a little giraffe. "Ah yes, my parents once took me to a zoo when I was just a little older than you. They had giraffes there, many of them." Father Harris kindly spoke to his son. Luke thought a moment then asked "Do I have pawents to take me to a zoo sometime?" The vicar stood and replied "Unfortunately not my child but that doesn't mean that someday you won't get to see a giraffe." Father Harris turned away as a tear ran down his face. His eyes met those of Sister Elizabeth's. She quickly pulled a tissue and dried the tears running down her own face. "I'm sorry; it's just that my heart breaks for the little one." She stated. Father Harris nodded then left the room. When the priest reached the bottom of the stairway he stood against the wall in the hallway and wept. His heart was also broken for the child. He could never forgive himself; it was his fault, his punishment, his penance to pay.

Years went by and the church's attendance and financial records remained steady. They weren't excellent by any means but the church could survive, at least for the time being. Luke turned six years old and Sister Elizabeth held a little birthday party for him. It was attended by Father Harris, Margaret, Mark, Angelina and herself. "It's time to open your gift!" Sister Elizabeth exclaimed as she held up a small box wrapped in colorful paper with a little bow. Luke's smile could be seen beneath his hood as she handed him the gift. They all watched as he opened it. Luke pulled out three tickets as he asked with puzzlement "What are these?" Sister Elizabeth answered "Tickets, Father Harris and I are going to take you to the zoo." Luke got so excited he gently bounced up and down with glee. He then ran to Father Harris and wrapped his arms around the vicar's leg. "Thank you Father, thank you!" he then ran to the nun and kissed her hand "Thank you Sister Elizabeth." Margaret tugged gently on the vicar's sleeve and whispered "Do you think that's a good idea?" Father Harris turned to her and said "We'll be taking him on a Monday afternoon during a school day. I've checked with the zoo, it's their slowest time."

Margaret replied “It seems you’ve given it considerable thought.” The priest replied with a smile “Yes, I have. The child needs to know there is a whole other world outside these walls.”

Sister Elizabeth helped Luke into a new hooded tunic she had made for him as she gave him instructions for their trip “You will listen to Father Harris and I at all times and do as we say. The animals are wild and can hurt you if you get too close. Follow our example and don’t get too loud or you may scare the animals. When outside on the street you must hold our hand for safety, understood?” Luke nodded then asked “Will they have giraffes and tigers?” Sister Elizabeth smiled as she answered “We’ll see when we get there. I certainly hope so.” Luke then asked “How are we going to get there?” Father Harris heard him as he entered the room and replied “I’ve called us a cab.” Sister Elizabeth smiled and said “Whew, for a moment I was afraid you were going to say we were taking the city bus.” Father Harris chuckled. Luke held tight to Father Harris’ hand as they walked out to the cab. He raised his head enough to see a short distance in front of him. “This is my first time being outside.” He said. “You’ve been on the balcony.” Sister Elizabeth responded. “Yeah but it’s my first time walking outside on the pavement.” Luke replied. He climbed into the cab behind Sister Elizabeth with Father Harris’ assistance. Once inside the vicar gave the cab driver their destination. As they pulled away from the curb the cab driver glanced into his mirror and asked Luke “Is this your first time going to the zoo?” The boy pulled his hood back enough to look up at Sister Elizabeth. “Go ahead, you can answer the driver.” She told him. Luke dropped his hood and replied “Yes sir, my first time.” The cab driver chuckled and said “You’re going to love it, I think it’s wonderful!” Luke smiled with excitement.

Luke began to get nervous as they approached the ticket booth. There were other people getting tickets, more people than he had ever been close to. He held tightly to the nun’s hand as they made their way through the gate. “What does that say?” Luke asked as they approached a large sign. The priest replied “It says, welcome to Lincoln Park Zoo.” Luke softly repeated the name of the zoo to himself as they walked. As they approached the first animal exhibit a small girl approximately twelve years old pointed and said to her brother “Look, it’s one of those creatures that steal robots in that space movie.” Sister Elizabeth bent down and told Luke “Don’t pay any attention to her. Remember what I told you about people outside the church.” Luke replied “Yes ma’am, they can be rude and cruel. We must show them the love of Christ.” Father Harris smiled

and patted Luke on the head as he spoke "Smart boy." Luke raised his hood just enough to see the animals at each exhibit. It was a slightly overcast day making viewing for him easier. The bright sun always hurt his eyes but in the dark he could see very well. Half way through the park they stopped for ice cream. "My legs are getting tired." Luke complained softly. "Then we'll sit here a while and let them rest." Father Harris replied with a smile. "Thank you." Luke expressed his gratitude. Sister Elizabeth suddenly pointed and said "Look Luke! I can see the giraffes from here." Luke stood up on the bench and slightly raised his hood. "Wow, they're really tall, even taller than Brother Mark." He commented. The vicar and the nun both chuckled. The caretaker was quite tall and lanky.

By the time they reached the exit Father Harris was carrying Luke. It was the most the child had ever walked in a single day. "We've got one last thing to do." Father Harris stated as he pulled a door open and carried Luke inside. "Oh wow, it's a gift shop." Sister Elizabeth said to Luke who was looking back over the vicar's shoulder. Luke spun around and his mouth gapped open at all the souvenirs. Stuff animals, toys, cups and more lined the many shelves. "Okay, look around and tell me what you want as a reminder of your trip to the zoo." Father Harris told the boy. Luke looked around and asked "You mean I can have something to take home with me?" Father Harris replied "That's right but just one thing, so choose carefully." After a short period of shopping Luke selected a small stuffed monkey. Father Harris sat Luke down and retrieved his wallet. After making the purchase he handed the toy to Luke then took the boy's other hand in his. As he headed for the door he turned to check on Sister Elizabeth and saw her at the register making a purchase. It was a small truck with Lincoln Park Zoo written on the side and it came with a lion in the back. He waited for her and as they went outside he smiled and said "We've got to be careful not to spoil him." The nun smirked and replied "I'll have you know these are mine." Father Harris chuckled but didn't respond. The cab ride back to the church was quiet. Luke was exhausted and Father Harris felt rather tired himself. When they arrived Father Harris said to the nun "I'll put him to bed. Thank you for going with us." Sister Elizabeth answered "It was my pleasure, good night." She then headed to the small cottage where she now spent her evenings. Father Harris carried the sleepy child up to his room and removed the boy's tunic. He tucked him into bed and kissed his cheek. "Good night, son." He whispered as Luke clutched his stuffed monkey. The boy was already asleep.

During Sunday Mass Sister Elizabeth began slipping Luke in through the front side door while the choir was singing and took him up into the unused balcony so he could be a part of the service. Luke loved it. As the choir sang he stood and slightly held his arms out as he gently swayed to the music. The nun smiled as the boy let the music fill every fiber of his being. Week after week he anxiously attended the service. He was always quiet and well behaved even when Sister Elizabeth had to leave him alone while she went down and provided a special song. Father Harris often looked up at them and smiled as he was speaking. As soon as the benediction began Sister Elizabeth would quietly slip Luke down the stairs and out the side door. They would talk about the service on the way back to his room. Sometimes he had questions but he mostly talked about the music. He loved to hear the old pipe organ. "Did you know that I can play that organ?" she asked him one day. "No," he gasped "seriously, you can play it?" She chuckled and said "Yes, I can. I can play the organ much better than I can a piano." Luke smiled as he replied "I'd love to hear it someday." The nun smiled down at him and replied "So do I."

CHAPTER THREE

The Voice of an Angel

More years passed and the church maintained a weak but steady attendance. “The tithes and offerings could be better but they’ll have to do.” Father Harris commented to Margaret one day as she filed away the records. “God always provides.” Margaret replied cheerfully. The vicar smiled and responded “Yes, he certainly does. It’s almost time for you to be going so thanks again for your help. I think I’ll go up and see how Luke and Sister Elizabeth are doing today.” Margaret picked up her sweater and said “Give them my love.” Father Harris nodded and replied “Absolutely.” Sister Elizabeth flipped through the new home school pamphlet with frustration as Father Harris entered Luke’s room. She saw him enter and declared “I can’t believe the state’s educational requirements lack any religious or moral training whatsoever!” Father Harris smiled as he watched Luke playing in the floor. “Hey, I remember those. I thought you said those were yours.” He commented as he pointed to the small zoo truck and the lion. “I gave him permission to play with them.” She retorted. The vicar turned and looked at her sternly then they both broke into a chuckle. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself. As you can see for yourself the child is so well behaved and he deserves more than this world could ever provide for him.” The nun confessed. Father Harris smiled and changed the subject “He’ll soon be nine years old. It seems like the years have flown by. The nun pushed some papers aside and said “Yes, he’ll be starting the fourth grade. By what I’m looking through here I’m almost certain he can take the final exam and get a passing grade without looking at a single book.” Father Harris smiled as he spoke “Perhaps because you’ve got him reading every book in the church library.” Sister Elizabeth replied. After a soft sigh she continued “He loves to read and his comprehension is far beyond his years. If what I have on my desk reflects the average child his age, then God help us all.” The priest almost laughed but then responded “Train up your child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” The nun muttered a soft “Amen.” as she watched Luke.

During the school year Sister Elizabeth ordered a Scholastic Aptitude Test to get some idea of just how smart Luke might be. He knew the answer to every question in his school books and was a whiz at arithmetic. When the test arrived she looked through it and muttered to herself

“Well, this should certainly test his knowledge.” On the day she gave him the test he finished in two hours. The time allotted was three and half hours. “Are you sure you don’t need to review your answers before I start grading it? You still have an hour and half.” She asked him when he brought it to her. He released the test into her hands and replied “No ma’am, I’m quite sure I got all the answers right.” Her eye brows went up slightly upon hearing him make such a bold statement. “Very well, we shall see. You may find a book to read while I check your answers.” The nun stated softly. With a sense of excitement she began grading his test. Page after page revealed all correct answers. She double checked behind herself to be certain. When she had completed the task she shook her head in total disbelief. There was no way he could have cheated yet he got all of the answers correct, one hundred percent. According to the grading chart standards he was rated as a genius. She quietly went to the door and removed the “Testing in Progress” sign. “May I ask how I did?” Luke looked up from his book and asked as the nun sat back down at her desk. Sister Elizabeth stared with disbelief at the child as she spoke “You had a perfect score, every answer was correct. You are quite a remarkable young man Master Luke.” He smiled and replied “Thank you. You’re a really good teacher.” She smiled and thanked him for the compliment.

On her way to her cottage the nun stopped by the vicar’s office. He was at his desk working so she tapped on the door frame. “Ah, Sister Elizabeth, please come in!” he greeted her. She entered into his office and took a seat in one of the chairs across from his desk. “So, how did he do on the test today?” the priest asked with anticipation. She handed him a folder with the graded test inside “See for yourself.” Father Harris quickly opened the folder and after looking over the results he sat back in his chair “Wow. I honestly didn’t expect this. After all, this test is normally given to eight graders with an average expectancy of sixty percent correct answers.” Sister Elizabeth nodded then responded “He’s a prodigy vicar, a genius at nine years old. To be honest, he should be in a university somewhere. There are algebra and basic trigonometry problems on that test. I seriously doubt that you or I would have scored that high.” Father Harris handed the folder back to the nun as he spoke “Amazing. We certainly can’t send him to a college at his age. The only course of action we can take is to continue as we’re doing. After high school you can give him his General Education Diploma, perhaps then I can get him enrolled with one of those on-line universities. Although typing will certainly be a problem for him. Also, I don’t see what

good that will do him anyway. He certainly can't go out into the world and apply his knowledge." Sister Elizabeth nodded, the vicar was right. She then suggested some changes "He's going to lose interest in his studies at this level. So may I suggest that less concentration be applied to his book studies and maybe add items of interest that he finds challenging." Father Harris sat back up in his chair and enquired "Such as what?" The nun thought a moment then said "Music, he loves music. I can begin teaching him to read sheet music. He certainly loves to read; perhaps I can pick up some books of interest to him from the local library. He can then present a book report to me on each of them." Father Harris smiled as he responded "Splendid idea. I may even visit the library myself and pick up a few things I think he should read." Father Harris then added "A few field trips wouldn't be a bad idea either. Let him see how the real world operates." Sister Elizabeth smiled; she and the vicar had come up with a great way to hold the child's interest in learning without drawing undue attention to him.

Luke enjoyed the lessons on reading music and was soon able to hum out the tune of rather complex sheet music. One day Sister Elizabeth purchased a used portable keyboard from a pawn shop and brought it to Luke's room. He was stunned and immediately said "Sister Elizabeth, I'm afraid my hands will not work to play a piano." She smiled as she sat the keyboard on a stand then she replied "It's not for you, it's for me. I don't consider myself to be a professional but I think I can play well enough to accompany you as you sing." Luke smiled as he responded to her words "Me, sing?" She looked over her shoulder and with a firm tone and replied "Yes, you." The music lessons continued but Luke was shy about singing. Father Harris brought in new books on ancient architecture, renaissance artist, and one he especially liked about different world cultures, jungle tribes, and the Australia aborigines. One afternoon Sister Elizabeth took Luke downtown to view the construction of a new high rise building. They discussed the use of the crane, the importance of a solid foundation, among other things. They were caught up in discussion when a young girl passing by with her mother screamed. Sister Elizabeth turned round to see what was going on. The little girl pointed at Luke and said to her mother "Look, it's a monster!" Sister Elizabeth looked down at Luke and saw the boy's tail sticking out from under his tunic. She quickly pulled the tunic over the boy's tail and whispered "Keep your tail hidden." After the mother had led her child away Sister Elizabeth bent down and spoke with Luke "The little girl meant no harm but people are frightened of what they don't understand." Luke didn't

respond but later when they returned to the cathedral he asked “Sister Elizabeth do you think I’m a monster?” She quickly replied “No child, you are no such thing. If anything you are an angel.” The school year soon ended and Luke was able to spend more time reading. He didn’t see Sister Elizabeth as often because she spent more time at the convent during the summers. He continued to practice his singing and became more confident working on it without anyone listening.

Father Harris found himself running back and forth to the library more and more often as Luke devoured knowledge like a dry sponge. The years seemed to pass by so fast as the boy grew larger and more muscular. His acquired knowledge had become vast yet he was hungry for more. Father Harris was so proud of Luke’s progress although he knew the world would never know of his genius. Although his son was horribly disfigured on the outside he was perfect on the inside. One day the vicar returned from the library to find some teenagers tossing small rocks up at the balcony. One of them yelled “Come out freak!” Father Harris shouted “Stop this nonsense! How dare you mistreat a monk at this cathedral! Leave now and don’t let me catch you around here again! Go or I’ll call the police!” The teens made a few rude comments as they departed. Father Harris rushed up to Luke’s room. “Are you alright?” he asked with concern. Luke was sitting in a chair away from the doors and windows. “Yes. The sun was setting so I went onto the balcony to get some fresh air. I had my hood over my face and simply stood there quietly for awhile. The next thing I know a rock hit me and some kid starting shouting for me to show my creepy face. I immediately turned around and came back inside and closed the doors. They stayed out there yelling and throwing rocks for some time. I was afraid they’d damage the stained glass windows but I don’t think they did any harm.” The priest knelt beside of Luke as he responded to the atrocity “Son, rebellious young men often seek out acts of violence in order to feel more grown up. Many of them have been mistreated themselves, perhaps by their own fathers. Some just pick it up by playing violent video games. You must forgive the bullies for their foolishness.” Luke looked up and smiled at Father Harris “I’ve already forgiven them. I’ve also considered that by attacking me someone else avoided their unwanted attention today.” Father Harris smiled back at Luke. His son was not only highly intelligent, he was a saint. “Here, I have a book for you.” he said as he held it out. Luke took the book and read the title aloud “Acts of Sacred Violence.” He chuckled then joked “Oh my, how timely.” Father Harris chuckled himself and replied “It’s about the holy crusades; however it is rather bizarre that I would have picked it out today.”

Father Harris and Sister Elizabeth sat in the vicar's office discussing what to get Luke for his birthday. He would be turning sixteen but was already slightly taller than the vicar. "He's singing better now although he doesn't really seem to put his heart into it. He lacks confidence. Perhaps some sound track CDs. I've seen them on-line and they come with sheet music." Sister Elizabeth suggested. Father Harris responded positively "I've heard him at night practicing and I know he does better when nobody is around. So, I think you're right. What should we order?" They selected several when Sister Elizabeth found one of her personal favorites "Christmas will be coming up before we know it, how about this one?" Father Harris looked at her selection "Ave Maria. You don't think that's a bit high for him? He's a young man now." The nun shook her head as she replied "No, he actually does better in the higher range. Now that his voice has gone through its change he can practice without his voice cracking and stalling on him. I believe he can do it, honestly I do." Father Harris was skeptical but he ordered it at her insistence.

A week before Christmas Sister Elizabeth packed her small suitcase. She was returning to the convent the next morning for Christmas break. As she moved things around she came across a book she had been meaning to take to Luke. It wasn't too late so she left the cottage and headed across the courtyard for the church. The vicar wasn't in his office and the sanctuary was empty. Slowly she made her way up the stairs and around to the vicar's small apartment. She encountered him in the hallway standing at the bottom of the stairway that led to Luke's room. "Sister Elizabeth what brings you over so late? I thought you were leaving early tomorrow morning to go to the convent for Christmas." The nun replied "I am but I came across this book I had been meaning to give to Luke. May I leave it with you?" Father Harris took the book and was about to say something when the music of Ave Maria came pouring down the stairs. "That boy, he knows not to play his music that loud." He stated gruffly. As he turned to go up the stairs a sweet beautiful voice blended perfectly with the music. "Wait." Sister Elizabeth said as she touched the vicar's shoulder. After a moment of listening she said "That voice is not a recording, it's Luke." Father Harris looked up the stairs and replied "Are you sure?" She pushed past the vicar and said "I'm certain of it!" then she quickly ascended the stairway with Father Harris close in pursuit. Very gently she opened the door and the two of them quietly entered the room. Luke was standing with his back to them at the entrance of the large stained glass doors which were opened wide. His arms were slightly out to his side and his head gently swayed as he sang

loud and clear. A light snow had begun to fall and Luke's voice filled the chilly room and spilled out onto the street below. As the music began to crescendo the snow fall began to increase. The soft cold breeze fluttered around his tunic as his voice lifted. Slowly Sister Elizabeth went to her knees and clutched the cross around her neck as tears streamed down her face. Father Harris stood in complete awe at what he was hearing. As the song came to a close a bright flash of lightning lit up the sky for just a moment. Luke lowered his arms and turned around "I'm sorry, I just felt the need to let it out. I didn't mean to disturb you." Father Harris was going to respond but there came the sound of cheering from the street below. He rushed out onto the balcony to find a large crowd across the street. They began shouting "One more time!" He looked up and down the street and saw people rushing to join the crowd. He looked out toward the shops and saw people with their Christmas packages moving in their direction. Some were calling for the shop keepers to step outside and listen. Entire families stood on their apartment balconies all up and down the street waiting to hear it again. There was a sense of excitement in the air. Father Harris waved to them then turned to Luke "Your audience is requesting that you sing it again." Luke blushed and said "I don't know if I can." Sister Elizabeth took Luke's Arm and said "You have lifted their spirits with your beautiful voice and they need more. These are hard times and the people need to be blessed. You can give their hearts what they need in this moment. Please, just close your eyes and let the music fill your heart like you just did." Luke looked at her "Okay, I'll try." Sister Elizabeth turned and went over to the CD player. She picked up the small table it sat on and moved it to the center of the room, directly behind Luke. Father Harris gently encouraged Luke onto the balcony then stepped back inside as the nun restarted the sound track. She turned it up slightly higher as the intro began. Luke started in perfect pitch and was soon singing full voice as the snow fell and the breeze swirled the snow about him. With his hands slightly extended and his body swaying he sang what was in his heart. The crowd below stood completely spell bound. Once again as the song concluded a flash of lightning lit up the sky and the crowd below cheered loudly. Luke bowed to them then turned and walked back inside. Father Harris stepped out and waved to the crowd once more and shouted "Merry Christmas!" he then turned and went inside. Sister Elizabeth helped him to close the large stained glass doors. "Tell me young man, why did you hide your beautiful voice from me?" she asked Luke with a smile as she dried her tears. Father Harris pulled out a handkerchief and dried his own eyes as he waited to hear Luke's response. "I didn't mean to. It was just hard singing in front of you. I guess

I was afraid you would judge me. You sing so well and I felt that my singing would sound bad in comparison.” Luke stated as he stood there with his head down and his hood covering most of his face. “You are a smart young man and you know much but this time you were wrong. You sing far better than I. Did you hear those people outside? You lifted their spirits. Their very soul was blessed by what they heard. I want you to be confident every time you sing. You have nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. I am so proud of you right now I can hardly stand myself.” The nun then stepped forward and firmly embraced Luke. Father Harris cleared his throat and said “I too am very proud of you Luke. Your singing is more beautiful than anything I think I have ever heard. Sister Elizabeth is correct; you have nothing to be ashamed of. Your voice is incredible to say the least.” The nun released Luke and turned to the vicar “He must sing at Christmas Mass!” She insisted. The priest wasn’t ready for such a request. “I will give it prayer and meditation.” He replied. Sister Elizabeth took a deep breath and boldly spoke “What is there to pray about? You just heard him! People will come from all over the river district if they know in advance he will be singing. I bet even now people are telling others what they witnessed this evening. Father Harris you need a miracle to save this struggling church and God himself has bestowed it upon you this night!” Luke stood silently and listened to every word. Father Harris stood speechless. He knew the nun was right, a miracle was standing right before them and it was his own son. “Sister, how can I expose him to the public? I am responsible for his safety.” The vicar attempted to end the discussion. The two stood in a face off until Luke interjected his own thoughts “Father Harris, if it will help the church I am more than willing to do my part. After tonight I think I can do it. I’ve practiced Ave Maria many times and I’ll practice it many more if it will help the church.” The vicar turned his back to them as his mind raced with concerns. “I will make him a special red velvet tunic with a slightly larger hood and longer sleeves. I’ll even make it longer to trail behind him. It will cover him well, I promise.” Sister Elizabeth pleaded. “When Mass ends people will want to speak with him. What if they crowd around him and cause him to fall?” the vicar struggled back to end the discussion. Sister Elizabeth would not relent “You are a man of God are you not? He has given you the miracle you need to save this church and yet you will not trust him, is that it?” Father Harris spun around as he snapped “No that is not it!” The nun stood with tight lips as she stared the priest down. After a moment she asked “What is so great a challenge that you would stand in God’s way of helping this church? Tell me this. I want to hear it.” Father Harris had tears running down his

face as he replied “If something were to happen to him I could not live with myself.” Sister Elizabeth reached out her hands and placed them on his shoulders as she spoke “I understand that your love and concern for him is great but my love for him is just as great and I am willing to take the risk that I may witness a miracle of God.” The vicar turned to Luke and asked “Are you truly willing to do this for our Lord? To stand before the congregation not knowing who may be out there? Can you sing without fear and trust God to protect you?” Luke stepped forward and hugged Father Harris as he responded “If it pleases our Lord I would walk through the fires of Hell itself to help you and this church.” Sister Elizabeth stood silent for quite some time then looked at the vicar and shattered the awkward silence with a single word “Well?”

The following morning Sister Elizabeth called to cancel her return to the convent. She explained that her student would be singing at Christmas Mass and she was needed there in order to prepare the young man for his first appearance in public. While speaking with her superior she encouraged Sister Agnes to bring all the nuns from the convent to Christmas Mass at Saint Matthews. Christmas fell on a Sunday that year and the service would be held Saturday night, Christmas Eve. Sister Agnes didn’t make any promises but wished her and the church well. Sister Elizabeth then rushed out to find material so she could begin making Luke a special holiday Tunic to wear when he performed. After searching in several stores she finally came across what she had in mind. A beautiful light weight crushed red velvet. She then selected some gold riprap to trim it. With a smile on her face and a song in her heart she hurried back to the church. Upon arriving she saw that Father Harris had changed the marquee, it read “Christmas Mass, special singing by the Angel of Saint Matthews.” She smiled to herself as excitement stirred within her. Quickly she made her way to her cottage and sang as she began her task. Luke was in his room reading the new book the nun had brought him. It was titled “The Courage of a Lion.” He found the book fascinating as it told of a crippled man left with no choice but to travel across Africa alone and on foot to rescue his family. Each day the character faced new challenges but he trusted God to keep him safe. “Luke, may I come in?” Father Harris requested softly from the doorway. “Of course father, please. I was only reading.” Luke replied. The vicar came in and pulled up a chair beside of his son. “I wanted to thank you for being a truly good young man, no, a truly great young man. In many ways you are much better than I. Your faith is unwavering and despite your physical struggle you have kept your heart strong.” The vicar

glanced over at the book Luke had been reading and added “Strong as that of a lion.” Luke bashfully thanked him for the compliment. Father Harris then said “I was thinking and decided that I never tell you enough of how proud I am of you. You have been nothing but perfect since you were a baby. I’ve never heard you cry and you have never refused to obey. You do your studies without complaint. You never gripe about being cooped up in this place all the time. I don’t think there are any parents who can say that of their children. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I love you. I felt the need to tell you this.” he then embraced Luke and held him tight. “I love you too but why should I complain? I have all that I could want right here with you and Sister Elizabeth.” Luke responded innocently. Father Harris pulled Luke’s hood all the way back and let it fall to the boy’s back, then he ran his hand gently over the side of the young man’s face. Luke’s green eyes sparkled in the light from the stained glass window. No longer did the boy’s large green serpent eyes bother him. Gently Father Harris stood and gave Luke a farewell nod as he said “I’ll let you get back to your book.” He then left the room. The vicar descended the stairs slowly. When he reached the hallway he sighed as he leaned back against the wall. He wanted so badly to tell the boy that he was his biological father but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Sister Elizabeth worked with Luke daily in preparing for Christmas Mass. On Thursday she brought him down to the sanctuary and helped him up to the podium. “Today, I will accompany you on the organ. It is loud so you must use your full voice like you did on the balcony. Okay?” Luke nodded and replied “Yes ma’am, I’ll do my best.” She then went to the organ. After making sure it was set correctly she began to play. Luke waited for the intro then started singing on the correct note. He loved singing with the organ and quickly lost himself in the song. With his arms slightly lifted he ever so gently swayed. When he had finished several people who had entered the church began to clap. He couldn’t see who it was without lifting his hood and he dared not do it. He recognized Margaret’s voice as she declared “Beautiful, absolutely beautiful!” The secretary and her husband Mike had stopped by the church for a moment of prayer. Sister Elizabeth went down to speak with them as Luke waited patiently. Others were there also. Among them were Sofia and her two daughters Camila and Valentina. They all called out their appreciation to Luke before leaving. “Okay, let’s go again.” Sister Elizabeth called out as she once more seated herself at the organ.

Saturday came before Luke felt he was ready for it but Sister Elizabeth assured him that he was more than ready as she helped him into his new tunic. Luke looked at it with a smile. The dark crushed red velvet was trimmed in gold accents that swirled in what looked like a Spanish inspired pattern on each sleeve and across the top of the hood. She had even purchased a large gold plated cross to hang around his neck. "It's beautiful." Luke commented as he stood before his full length mirror. He turned his head and looked at the gold pattern that swirled up from the long trail of fabric in the back. "I love it." He stated as he turned to the nun for her approval. She smiled and replied "It looks good on you. You are the very vision of a Christmas angel." He turned back and looked at himself once more. Sister Elizabeth checked the seams and tugged at the tunic here and there as she spoke "Because of the length of your tunic and the oversized hood Father Harris and I will be helping you up the stairs of the platform. Do not rush and do not slouch. Nor should you lean upon the podium. Sing like you always do with your arms lifted out. The sleeves are extra long so there is no chance of your hands being seen. Remember to keep your eyes covered and be aware of that tail. After singing you will wait for Father Harris to help you back down the stairs. I will be there to guide you back to the front pew. "What? I will be sitting on the front pew?" Luke gasped. Sister Elizabeth smiled as he responded "Yes, before and after your performance. You have earned that right and the pew will be reserved only for the two of us. One more thing, speak only when spoke to. Be gracious of compliments and maintain your humility." Luke smiled and replied softly "Yes ma'am. I will be on my best behavior." The door opened and Father Harris entered "Is everyone ready?" Luke and Sister Elizabeth turned around. "As ready as we'll ever be." The nun replied. "Oh Luke, you look magnificent!" the priest commented. "Doesn't he?" the nun stated with a beaming smile. Sister Elizabeth then said "I'll bring him in just after the procession." Father Harris walked over to them and stated "You'll do no such thing." Then with a smile he added "The two of you will follow me in as part of the procession." Sister Elizabeth beamed with delight as Luke smiled nervously. "We have about ten minutes. You two come in the front side door and stand behind me when the organ begins the prelude. I have instructed the acolytes and others to move slightly slower than usual this evening. So, I'll see you too very shortly. By the way, the lower level of the sanctuary is nearly full." He then quickly left. Sister Elizabeth looked Luke over one last time before they started down the steps. As they stepped outside on their way to the front side entrance a light snow had begun.

They could see more people making their way into the church. "I hope you're not nervous." The nun asked Luke as they reached the door. "Not really, just a little anxious. I'm actually looking forward to it." Luke replied. The organ began playing the prelude. "Okay, here we go." The nun stated as she opened the door. Father Harris reached out and assisted getting Luke inside safely. They stood quietly for a moment then as the second stanza in the song started they began moving forward. Slowly they entered the sanctuary and began moving up the aisle. The lower level was nearly full and Luke could feel everyone's eyes upon him. He and Sister Elizabeth walked side by side behind Father Harris. Luke's sensitive ears picked up whispering as he passed. "That's him." a lady said to someone beside her. Further up the aisle another woman whispered "Oh Linda, look, there's the angel. I can't wait for you to hear him sing!" When Luke and the nun reached the front they turned right and stood at the center of the front pew. When the music stopped Father Harris motioned for all to sit. Even after sitting down Luke could feel all eyes upon him and began to get nervous. On the pew behind him were a large number of nuns from Sister Elizabeth's convent. Sister Elizabeth somehow sensed Luke's nervousness and placed her hand over his. Luke took a deep breath and relaxed as the choir began. When the choir and congregational singing had ended Father Harris stepped to the podium. "I bid greetings of great joy to you all. On this night of our Lord and Savior's birth we are indeed blessed. I am humbled to stand before you this night and call for the Angel of Saint Matthews to come and sing for us." Sister Elizabeth tapped Luke's leg and they stood together. She walked with him to the stairs that lead up onto the platform and assisted him the first few steps. Luke hated walking in shoes but he had to wear them to hide his claws. Father Harris took his arm and assisted him the remainder of the way up the stairs, then over to the podium as Sister Elizabeth went to the organ. There was a stir of excitement in the sanctuary then from the organ came the intro to Ave Maria. A hush of silence fell upon the people. Luke softly cleared his throat and exactly on cue he began to sing. With his eyes closed he began to gently sway as the music seemed to lift him. As the song proceeded his arms drifted up by his side. The music filled his very soul. He could even feel the vibration of the organ pipes. A holy silence had filled the sanctuary. Only Luke's voice and the organ could be heard. As the song reached its crescendo tears flowed from many. Luke had never felt so good in his life. With perfect pitch he softly brought the song to completion. As the organ pipe's vibration ended there was complete silence, not a whisper or movement could be detected. Luke gently bowed and as he raised back up there was a roaring ovation unlike anything he had

ever heard. Such applause was rarely heard of in a Catholic church. He felt Father Harris gently take his arm. As they made their way across the platform the applause continued. "Well done my boy, well done." Father Harris whispered to him as he released him over to Sister Elizabeth. Going downstairs in shoes he dreaded the most but he made it without incident. The noise settled down as the nun led him slowly over to the pew. Again Luke could feel all eyes upon him and most of those eyes were filled with tears of joy. His keen ears picked up the sound of people sniffing, including grown men. Sister Elizabeth slipped him a sticky note with the drawing of a smiley face. Luke smiled and slightly chuckled. The vicar began reading his passage for the evening. He had titled his message "In the presence of angels." He spoke of the holiness of the moment when Christ was born. How the animals in the stable had bowed in silence as they were surrounded by the presence of angels. He then added a passage about some entertaining angels unaware. Then he said "Tonight we are in the presence of angels, most spiritual but perhaps one in the physical." Luke didn't move, being referred to as angel made him feel strange but not in a bad way. Sister Elizabeth's hand softly patted his knee as she smiled over at him.

As the service came to a close everyone stood for the benediction. Father Harris dismissed with the words "Merry Christmas to you all." Margaret quickly made her way over to the nun and Luke. "I don't think there was a dry eye in the house when you sang Luke, the moment was just magical." She declared. Luke nodded and softly replied "You are too kind." Her husband Mike patted him on his shoulder and said "It was a blessing I'll never forget." Luke nodded and responded "The Lord is good." Several were gathered around Father Harris with questions about Luke. Such as where was he from? Is he a monk?" Luke's keen hearing picked up on the responses Father Harris gave them "He was born abroad but has been here since he was an infant." "He is in all essence what a monk represents and much more." Angelina and her family gathered around Luke. The Latino woman spoke excitedly about the service and how much his singing meant to her. "I am pleased you were blessed." Luke replied softly. "I have never heard any better." Her husband Nicolas stated. Luke gently bowed to him. The couple's youngest child Camila hugged his leg making Luke feel unsteady on his feet. She looked up and said "We love you Angel." Luke softly replied "I love you too little one." Several others came by and complemented his singing in some manner. Luke maintained his humility. As the crowd thinned Father Harris walked over to Luke and put his arm around him as he spoke "Friar Lucius, may I

have the honor of escorting you back to your room?” Luke nodded and replied “The honor would be mine. I am getting quite tired. I guess it’s all the excitement.” Sister Elizabeth wished them “Merry Christmas” then quickly went to speak with her Sisters in Christ as they were departing. “We had a record number in attendance tonight, nearly seven hundred. Our treasurer just informed me that our offertory box was stuffed beyond belief.” Father Harris told Luke as they made their way through the door at the back where the choir always entered. “I am pleased.” Luke replied. Father Harris walked a little further then remarked “Sister Elizabeth was correct; your singing brought about a true miracle.” Luke remained silent for a few minutes as they walked. Just as they reached the stairway leading to his room he asked “Is what you said true, that I am a monk?” Father Harris patted him on the shoulder and responded “To me you are the purest among monks that I have ever met. Does that title bother you?” Luke chuckled then answered “Not at all. I had just never thought of myself as such. Neither have I ever thought of myself as an angel.” Father Harris smiled as he responded “I also consider you a saint.” Luke remained silent until they reached his room then stated with a chuckle “I think your opinion of me is rather biased.” Father Harris laughed then responded “Yes, I’m sure it is.” The vicar helped Luke out of his dress tunic. Luke stood there in his underclothes and asked “How can I be all those things when I look like this?” Father Harris was caught off guard by Luke’s question but suddenly an idea came to him. After Luke had put on his casual tunic the vicar led him out onto the balcony. It was still snowing lightly as he pointed to the stone statues on either side of the balcony. “Do you know what those are?” he asked Luke. “Yes,” Luke replied “they’re gargoyles.” Father Harris then asked “Do you know what they symbolize?” Luke thought a moment and answered “No, I can’t say that I do. However, they are found on many older cathedrals around the world. They channel water off the roof to prevent erosion on the lower levels.” The vicar smiled and said “That is their functional purpose but they symbolize guardians that ward off evil. They are mystical protectors of the church and the people within. They look like monsters yet their purpose is to fight against evil. They are soldiers of good so to speak.” Luke smiled as he softly said “They kind of look like me.” Father Harris looked back up at one of the stone creatures and realized Luke was right. They had pointed ears, a tail that came to a triangular end, and wings. “Yes,” the priest replied in astonishment “in a way they do.” After a thoughtful pause he added “I don’t want to call you a gargoyle but perhaps you are a guardian against evil, a champion of good. You certainly were tonight.” A voice below on the street

shouted “Merry Christmas!” The two of them looked down and realized that people were still standing around talking after leaving the service. Father Harris called back “Merry Christmas to you as well!” Luke gently waved a sleeve at them. After going back inside the vicar said “You sang beautifully tonight and I was wondering if you would select another song for our New Year’s Mass?” Luke smiled and replied “If you wish. Do you have anything particular in mind?” Father Harris shook his head “No, just whatever you feel like singing. I’m sure the people would like to hear more from you.” Luke replied “Okay, I’ll speak with Sister Elizabeth and we’ll pick something out. I truly enjoyed having her providing the organ accompaniment.” Father Harris leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on Luke’s cheek “Merry Christmas son. I’ll see you in the morning. Come down and join me around eight. I’m making pancakes!” Luke responded with a big smile “Pancakes sound great! Merry Christmas, Father Harris.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Wolves among the Sheep

Luke sang during the New Year's Mass with Sister Elizabeth playing the organ. The sanctuary was completely filled as was the balcony. There were even people crowded into the front atrium and along the back of the sanctuary. "Can you believe the crowd tonight?" Sister Elizabeth asked Father Harris with a sense of joy. "It was the fullest it has been since my assignment here." The vicar replied with amazement. Luke stood silent as the two spoke in the back hallway. Father Harris then discussed with Sister Elizabeth about rotating Luke's singing with hers and the youth chorus. Sister Elizabeth thought it to be a wise choice but to let Luke sing the following week before starting the rotation. He agreed and Luke nodded that it was fine with him.

Two weeks later the Youth Chorus provided the special music as Luke and the nun sat on the front pew. The attendance remained high and many of the people stood around chatting after the services. Although the economy of the gothic city was still unstable the people seemed happy and content. "Hello." A soft voice greeted him immediately after the benediction. "Hello." Luke responded as Sister Elizabeth stood close by his side. "My name is Cynthia Montgomery. It's my family's first time visiting Saint Matthews. I understand you have a beautiful singing voice and I was wondering when you will be singing? I want to be certain that I'm here to enjoy it." She softly asked. Luke could not see her face but her voice was as soothing as any he had ever heard. "Next week. I would be honored if you and your family could be here." He responded graciously. "I'll be sure to attend, in the meanwhile I will pray for you." Cynthia stated sweetly. "That is very thoughtful of you, Cynthia." Luke replied as he lifted his head just enough to see that she had lovely golden hair flowing over her shoulders. "Well, until next week. Bye-bye." She said as she turned to leave. Luke lifted his head a little more to watch her walk away. He got a quick glimpse of the side of her face. She was beautiful, very beautiful. "We had best get you back to your room." The nun interrupted his thoughts. "Yes, of course." Luke stated as he followed her. "She seemed to be a very nice young lady." Luke commented to Sister Elizabeth as they walked down the back hallway. "Yes, she did. I understand the Montgomery family is quite wealthy. They own a large furniture factory and several retail stores throughout the city. I'm

surprised they would visit a church on this side of town.” The nun informed him. “Do you think they came in hopes of hearing me sing?” Luke asked. The nun continued walking as she answered “It would seem so. There was an article this past week in the newspaper regarding your singing. Father Harris told me that a national magazine even mentioned the angel of Saint Matthews. It would seem many are interested in hearing you sing. This is a good thing. People have neglected the church for far too long.” They arrived at the stairway leading to Luke’s room. The nun followed him up the stairs to be certain he wouldn’t fall. She understood that shoes offset his balance. “Get some rest and I’ll see you tomorrow Friar Lucius.” The nun playfully stated as she patted his arm. “Thank you Sister.” Luke extended his gratitude as the nun turned to leave. “You’re welcome.” She said as she departed and closed the door behind her. Luke walked across his room and went out onto the balcony to watch the people as they left the church. As he stood there a large limousine pulled up to the front of the church. A family made their way out to it as the driver opened the car door for them. “Cynthia.” Luke whispered to himself as he saw the young lady with her beautiful golden hair getting into the car. Before the driver closed the car door Cynthia looked up and saw him. She gave him a gentle little wave. Luke slowly waved a sleeve back to her. A minute later the limo pulled away from the curb. “Cynthia Montgomery.” Luke muttered as the car disappeared out of sight.

The following day Luke went down to the vicar’s office and asked Father Harris about the Montgomery family. Father Harris told Luke what he knew “The Montgomery family owns a large furniture factory on the far side of city. Their retail stores are in most of the larger cities across the nation. Raymond Montgomery is quite wealthy and personally I’m surprised his family would visit a church on this side of town.” Luke nodded and replied “Their daughter Cynthia spoke with me after the service. She said they plan to return next week to hear me sing.” The vicar replied “Perhaps they read the newspaper article about you and were curious. It’s not surprising. I’ve had a large number of calls regarding you and personally it makes me uneasy.” Luke inquired “Why does it trouble you?” Father Harris looked at Luke as he answered “Because you never know who may come into the church. There are people in this world with big ambitions who would take advantage of you. Also, there are those that may wish you harm.” A puzzled look came across Luke’s face as he asked “Wish me harm because of my singing?” The priest responded “Not just because of your singing. If they ever saw you without your hood

they would be motivated by fear.” Luke replied “I understand. I’ll continue to be careful and keep myself covered.” Father Harris got up from his desk and went over to his son “I wish everyone could see the beauty that is within your heart but unfortunately the vast majority of people are spiritually blind.” Luke gave Father Harris a weak smile and a gentle nod of his head to let him know that he understood.

Each day Luke practiced singing with Sister Elizabeth playing the organ in preparation for Mass. The nun was pleased with his singing and excited for the people to hear him. The week went by quickly and when the time came she presented him with another dress tunic. It was brown like his casual tunics but patterned after the larger Christmas tunic he had worn. Luke looked at the trim that was less elaborate yet very attractive. “I have no doubt you will be a blessing to all who come.” She told him as she tugged on the sleeves and looked him over. “I’m hoping Cynthia will be here today.” Luke stated. “I see, the little rich girl with golden hair that you spoke with last week. It may be best if you kept your mind off such matters. Focus on your singing.” She replied with a stern look as she walked around him. “Well, I think you’re ready.” She finally stated. They sat and waited for Father Harris and a few minutes later he stepped into the room. With excitement in his eyes he said “The church is running over with people, there’s standing room only!” Sister Elizabeth smiled and responded “Then I suggest we give them the blessing they came for, shall we?” She took Luke’s arm and the three of them went downstairs. Luke and the nun took their place in the procession. People had to press together to make room for them to enter the sanctuary. As the organ played they made their way to the front. Due to the large crowd Father Harris had brought in a short bench from the back and placed it over to the side of the altar for them to sit. Facing the large crowd made Luke a bit uneasy but he calmed down when he got a quick glimpse of Cynthia in the audience. The moment came for him to sing and Sister Elizabeth helped him up the first few steps then Father Harris assisted him the rest of the way. He stood at the podium and waited for the nun to begin playing. He slightly lifted his head just long enough to get a glimpse of Cynthia. She seemed anxious to hear him. The music started and Luke closed his eyes and let the music flow over him. The vibration of the organ pipes energized his body. He began to sing as his body ever so slightly swayed. His head movements blended with the music as he lifted his voice in song. Luke loved the feeling it gave him and as he reached the crescendo he gave it all he had. Softly the song came to an end and the music

stopped. There was complete silence as in times before. He gave a gentle bow and the crowd roared with applause louder than ever. Father Harris gently took his arm and they moved across the platform as the cheers continued. Things settled down as he and Sister Elizabeth sat down. The message Father Harris gave was titled "Understanding God's ways." Luke liked the message and found it quite informative. They stood for the benediction and the vicar prayed Luke's sharp hearing detected a slight commotion among the first few pews. "Amen, go in peace." Father Harris finished before heading down to greet people. There was a sudden rush of people headed toward them and Luke panicked. Sister Elizabeth stepped in front of him as a group of people began calling to Luke. One woman ran up and shoved a microphone in Luke's face but the nun slapped it away. The crowd was quickly upon them and pulling at Luke's sleeve as they tried to hand him business cards. Sister Elizabeth insisted they get back but they pushed forward. One of them shoved Sister Elizabeth aside and she fell to the floor. Luke found himself surrounded by a noisy group that was struggling against one another as each sought his undivided attention. Among them were music producers, news reporters, magazine writers, photographers, and talk show representatives. He was pushed and shoved constantly and the fear of falling overcame him. Above the noise he heard Cynthia's voice shouting to her bodyguard "Cecil, go and help him!" Father Harris quickly appeared and found himself being pushed back repeatedly. Margaret and her husband Mike rushed around the commotion and helped Sister Elizabeth to her feet. "Stop this madness! How dare you people behave like this, you are within sacred walls!" Father Harris shouted to no avail. Suddenly the crowd was shoved back and a big muscular man stood between Luke and the crowd. It was Cynthia's body guard. He stood with his arms out and a fierce look upon his face. "Leave, now! You dare desecrate the house of God? Get out!" Father Harris shouted at the crowd as he stood beside of Cecil. They saw they were not going to get to Luke and began to disband. Some made rude remarks but one shouted "The boy can make a fortune off of just one album release!" Father Harris shouted back "He has no desire for wealth! Are you so blind you can't see that he is a monk! Now get out!" Cecil stood his ground as Father Harris, Sister Elizabeth, Margaret and Mike guarded Luke's retreat through the choir entrance. Mike remained behind to guard the door as the rest of them rushed away. "Sister Elizabeth I saw you fall but I couldn't reach you to help. Are you okay?" Luke asked as they made their way to the second level. She replied "I'm fine, nothing hurt but my pride. I'm sorry you were exposed to such ungodly behavior." Luke remained silent and kept moving. When they reached the stairs to

Luke's room Margaret spoke to the vicar "If you feel things are okay I'll be returning to check on Mike." Father Harris turned to her and thanked her and she quickly headed back down the hallway. Once they were safely in Luke's room Father Harris placed a hand on each of their shoulders and asked "Are either of you injured in any way?" They both replied that they were fine. "You should go back and make sure things have settled down. The parish will be concerned." Sister Elizabeth said to him as she sat down. "Yes, you're right. I'll be back shortly." He replied then quickly departed. "Whew! What a mess!" the nun exclaimed as she slouched back into the chair. Luke quietly sat down on the edge of his bed as he asked "Those were money changers, like the ones Christ reprimanded in the Bible, weren't they? Sister Elizabeth replied "Yes child, they were and now you see how they act when they think they can make a profit off of someone. Their blasphemous behavior could have resulted in someone getting seriously hurt."

Father Harris returned to the sanctuary to find Margaret, her husband Mike, the entire Martinez family and several others, including the Montgomery family standing near the door. They were waiting to verify Luke's safety. "Is Luke okay?" Cynthia asked as she quickly approached the vicar. "He'll be fine, just shaken up a little. Thank you for your concern. I also want to thank your body guard for coming to our aid." Father Harris replied as he reached out to shake the large man's hand. As Cecil extended his hand the vicar saw a small but disturbing tattoo between Cecil's thumb and forefinger. Father Harris pretended not to notice it and turned to speak with the others standing around. People began to depart upon hearing that all was well. "I can't believe people would behave in such a manner right here in God's house!" Margaret exclaimed with frustration. "We will need to take precautions from this day forward." Father Harris commented. Mike responded to the vicar's words "The next time Luke sings some of the ushers and I will stand guard to prevent it from happening again." Father Harris thanked him and soon the sanctuary was empty. He then rushed to his office and flipped through a book on the history of the Vatican. He soon found what he was looking for, a photo showing the small tattoo mark that identified members of the Vatican Guard. It was an exact match for the one on Cecil's hand.

Father Harris and Luke sat in front of the television to watch the evening news as they ate their pizza. "This is really good." Luke stated as he ate a slice of the freshly delivered pizza. "It really

is.” Father Harris replied just as the news started. They both sat in shock as a video of the church skirmish began the hour’s news segment. Apparently someone in the group had stood back and videotaped the entire mess then sold the footage to the major networks. It had made national news headlines. “This is not good.” Father Harris mumbled as he watched in shock. When the video showed Cecil force the crowd back the vicar recalled the small tattoo on the man’s right hand. Cold shivers run up the vicar’s spine as he continued to watch.

Tuesday morning the phone rang and Margaret took the call. She placed the caller on hold and came into the vicar’s office “Father Harris, you have a call from Bishop Valero’s office.” The priest nodded and reached for the receiver. He then took a deep breath before pressing the button as Margaret returned to her desk. “Father Harris.” He answered. “One moment please” a woman stated. After a short pause the Bishop’s voice addressed him. “Father Harris it has come to my attention that you had a disturbance at the Cathedral this past Sunday. Apparently there was a commotion over a young man’s singing, is this correct?” Father Harris tried to explain that it looked worst than it really was. The Bishop interrupted him “Be that as it may, my research revealed something unsettling regarding the young man. Cardinal McKinley will be arriving within a few days and we will be paying you a visit. Be sure the young man is there when we arrive. Father Harris’ face went pale as he replied “Yes sir, of course.” The call ended and the priest sat still with his heart racing. A visit from a Vatican cardinal was never good news. “They know about Luke.” He whispered to himself as fear set deep into his stomach.

Friday morning Bishop Valero and Cardinal McKinley arrived. Father Harris had Sister Elizabeth and Luke waiting with him in the sanctuary. A third man was with them but he wasn’t introduced. His black suit, shaved head, sunglasses and a small tattoo on his right hand told Father Harris all he needed to know. The priest tried not to let his fear show as Cardinal McKinley walked up to Luke and looked him up and down. He then reached up and tugged Luke’s hood off. Luke was wearing the head garment that Sister Elizabeth had made for him. His eyes on the other hand were another matter. “Look at me boy.” The cardinal insisted as he stood in front of Luke. Slowly Luke raised his head and opened his eyes. The cardinal stepped back and looked at the vicar as he inquired firmly “Just as I suspected. This is the Evan’s child born at Saint Scholastica, is it not?” Father Harris had no choice but to answer honestly. The cardinal

had done his homework and had the situation figured out. No doubt he had spoken with Sister Monet. “Yes sir, it is.” He replied helplessly. “Remove that thing from your head.” The cardinal demanded of Luke in a firm tone of voice. Luke looked over at Father Harris who gave him a nod. Slowly he removed the brown habit from his head. “Dear God, his ears are pointed!” the bishop gasped. “You would dare raise a demon in the house of God?” Cardinal McKinley spat viciously at the vicar. “He is not a demon!” Father Harris firmly retorted. The cardinal lifted Luke’s left arm and pulled back the large sleeve. “Then what do you can this?” he asked hatefully as he yanked the two elastic bands from Luke’s arm and pulled the young man’s hand open. “Oh merciful Lord, he has wings!” the bishop gasped in horror. Out of the corner of his eye Father Harris saw movement from the man in the shadows. Sister Elizabeth stood up from the pew and interjected what was on her mind “I assure you the child is not a demon. His disfigurement may give that appearance but he is an angel if anything!” Everyone’s attention turned to the nun as she stood defiant. “Who are you?” the cardinal asked as he took a step toward her. “I am Sister Elizabeth Keifer of the convent Sisters of the Sacred Heart. I have cared for Luke since infancy and have educated him over the years since. His heart is pure despite his physical deformities.” The cardinal gave her a mean glare and asked “Why have you not informed your superiors of this atrocity? Did you fear they would reach the same conclusion that I have?” Sister Elizabeth stood tall and responded firmly “I have dealt with deformed and special needs children most of my life and I can prove that Luke is not a demon!” Cardinal McKinley smirked and replied “Prove? I don’t need proof of anything. I can see it right here, standing before me!” The third man slowly began to walk up the side isle of the sanctuary toward them, staying in the shadows of the balcony along the wall. Sister Elizabeth became furious but she recalled what Father Harris had said to her the day she first saw Luke. She immediately responded “You need to look upon him with your heart, not your mind.” She then added “The spiritual does not always match the physical.” Cardinal McKinley glared at her a moment then said “Very well, prove to me he is not the monster I see before me.” The mysterious man stopped his advance and stood within the balcony shadows. Sister Elizabeth went to Luke and pulled his hood back over his head then replaced the arm bands. She then led Luke up onto the platform and over to the podium as the cardinal and bishop sat down. Before switching on the microphone she whispered to Luke “Sing my child, sing like you have never sung before.” She then made her way to the organ and began to play Ave Maria. Luke closed his eyes as the music filled him. His

body swayed as the vibrations of the organ pipes seemed to lift him higher than ever before. He caught the first note perfectly and his arms lifted slightly. His heart fell in sync with the passion of the song and his voice expressed it well. The bishop and cardinal sat frozen with surprise at what they were hearing. As much as they tried to resist their eyes filled with tears. When the song ended they sat motionless. Sister Elizabeth stepped away from the organ and made her way over to the two men. They were still mesmerized by Luke's singing. "Well, what have you to say now?" she snapped at them with her hands on her hips. Neither of them spoke for a moment. Finally Cardinal McKinley stood and turned to Father Harris, totally disregarding the nun's fierce stance before him. "We will keep a vigilant watch on the boy. If he ever leaves the church and its teachings I shouldn't have to tell you what the future will hold for him." With that Cardinal McKinley and Bishop Valero turned and walked up the aisle toward the front door of the sanctuary. The third man stepped out of the shadows and gave Luke a hard look before following Cardinal McKinley and Bishop Valero out the door. "They are nothing but modern day Scribes and Pharisees!" Sister Elizabeth rebuked them. Father Harris rushed to her and gave her a hug as he expressed his gratitude "Thank you Sister, I was terrified at what they might do." As the hug ended she asked "Those two? What could they have done?" Father Harris replied "Not them but the third man with them. He was a Vatican Guard. I hate to say this but these days they serve as assassins for the Vatican. Had the cardinal ordered it he would have taken Luke out back and killed him." The nun's mouth dropped open with shock "Surely not!" Father Harris nodded as he replied "Yes, I'm afraid so." As he walked up to Luke who was still standing at the podium he said "They have a spy here in the city, perhaps more than one. I hate to say it but one of the Montgomery family's body guards is a former Vatican Guard. It's Cecil, the one that helped us. I have seen the mark on his hand." Sister Elizabeth sat down with the look of complete surprise on her face. "Are you certain of this Father?" Luke asked as he lifted his hood. "Yes son, there is no mistake." Father Harris responded with regret as he helped Luke down the steps. "How do you know the man with them was a Vatican Guard, he may have simply been their driver?" Sister Elizabeth inquired out of disbelief. The priest explained "I saw the mark on his hand. It's small and most people wouldn't pay it any attention. However, I know the mark from my studies. I have feared for Luke all these years and constantly kept watch for such a mark. When I saw it on Cecil's hand I feared the worst would come. Thanks to you Luke is safe, at least for now. We must be vigilant in the days to come."

“Hey Kevin, Get it here!” a slim unshaven man called to one of his associates. “Yeah Paul, what’s up?” Kevin asked as he entered the dark room. Kevin was a slightly chubby man in his early forties. He was balding and had a messy beard. “Have you seen this?” Paul asked as he pointed to a video on his computer. “Yeah, in a minute some fools start making a fuss over a singing monk.” Kevin replied. “Look closer.” Paul said as he restarted the video. The video started with a view of the front atrium and moved around before making its way down the aisle. “There.” Paul said as he froze the image. “Well, well, well.” Kevin stated as he leaned forward and got a closer look. “Their offertory is stuffed to the max my friend.” Paul commented with a grin that exposed his missing teeth. “Yeah and the banks don’t open until Monday.” Kevin added in a sinister manner. “What are you guys looking at?” a third man inquired as he entered. “Look at this Fred.” Kevin said as he motioned for Fred to come in. Fred was in his late thirties, muscular but lacked in common sense. The three men watched the video again. Fred then asked “So, how we going to get to that cash with all those people around it?” Paul elbowed Fred and replied “We’re not. They keep the money in the church office until the following morning. We wait until Sunday night and break into the church. We snatch the money and high tail it out of there. “What’s the name of the church?” Fred asked. Paul sat back in his chair and replied “Saint Matthews Cathedral.” Kevin replied “Oh, I know that church; my old lady went there before we split up. After I got laid off she went there to ask for help paying our rent.” Paul sat up straight “Did you go with her?” Kevin nodded as he answered “Yeah, cheap bastards only gave her two hundred dollars and told her it was the best they could do because of declining attendance.” Paul smiled as he inquired “So you know where the church office is located?” Kevin grinned as he replied “I most certainly do. I also know a back door we can enter. My wife and I were taken to the church’s food and clothing center. I saw a door with glass panels.” Fred then asked “What’ll we do if somebody catches us snooping around inside?” Paul pulled his pistol and raised it as he responded “We shut them up, that’s what we do.” Fred replied with a goofy chuckle “Okay, that’s cool with me.”

Sunday morning mass was very well attended at Saint Matthews and the youth chorus delighted everyone with their song. After the service Father Harris joined the treasurer and members of the finance committee in his office. Upon completion of writing out the deposit slip the treasurer handed the prepared deposit to Father Harris. “Wow, an attendance of eight hundred and seventy

two with an offertory of ninety eight hundred dollars. Maybe we can start talking about getting that day care program started.” Father Harris commented. The treasurer responded “If the offertory stays this strong we can even start talking about that new building for recreation and fellowship.” One of the ushers replied “Amen to that.” The vicar placed the money bag into a metal file cabinet and locked it away as he said good-bye to everyone. He then went to Luke’s room. “Where’s Sister Elizabeth?” he asked. Luke was reading and lifted his head as he responded “She went to have lunch with some of her sisters from the convent.” Father Harris then asked “Okay, so how does Chinese sound to you?” Luke smiled as he replied “Sounds great!” Father Harris smiled and said “Okay, I’ll call in a delivery order from Chef Jung’s. Join me in my apartment in about twenty minutes.” Luke held his thumb in his book to keep his place as he talked “I’ll be there. Do I need to run down to the kitchen and grab a bottle of soda?” Father Harris was already starting down the stairs as he replied “No need. I’ve already brought one up with me.” The two sat in Father Harris’ apartment and enjoyed their lunch while watching the Bulls play the Lakers. After the game Luke returned to his room and started back to reading his book. At twilight he stopped reading and opened the stained glass doors. Cautiously he stepped out on to the balcony. It was a clear but somewhat chilly night. Luke identified several star constellations as he enjoyed the fresh air. The street was already quiet and the shops nearby had begun closing up for the night. Mr. Caudle who ran the market on the corner to his left was moving things back inside. He noticed Luke on the balcony and waved to him. Luke waved back. Mr. Caudle and his wife were faithful members of the church and often brought Luke and the vicar treats from his market that were approaching expiration date. He always said “Better to share than throw away.” An old car went across the intersection and disappeared behind the church. It left a trail of smoke as it made a loud noise indicating that it had motor issues. Luke caught the sound of teenagers coming from the darker streets to his right. A few minutes later a group of boys ran across the street. His sharp eyes focused in and saw they were wearing jackets with a gang insignia, the cobras. A short time later a police car stopped in front of the market. One of the officers ran inside to get something before Mr. Caudle closed up. “Thanks Jim, appreciate it!” the officer shouted back as he exited the store. A moment later the police car went on its way. Mr. Caudle closed up and went to his upstairs apartment over the store. The street was now deserted and extremely quiet. Luke’s sensitive ears picked up the sound of the old noisy car that had passed by earlier. It sounded as if it was just a couple of

blocks away. Luke went back inside and closed the doors. He wasn't sleepy so he sat down to read some more in his book. He noticed the automated outdoor lighting surrounding the church went off, which told him it was ten o'clock. He decided to read another hour before turning in for the night. Shortly before eleven o'clock Luke's ears picked up the sound of the noisy car again. It was moving much slower as it went past the church. Luke put his book marker in place and closed his book. He then turned off his reading lamp and climbed into bed. With his head propped up on his pillow he thought about Cynthia. She had come up to him after the service that morning with some sheet music she had been working on. "Are you familiar with this song?" she had asked him in her sweet voice. He wasn't but quickly read the notes and hummed some of it back to her. "You certainly can read music well." She had commented. Luke had told her that Sister Elizabeth had begun teaching him to read music at the age of nine. Cynthia was always so kind to him. Luke was distracted from his thoughts by what sounded like glass breaking. It was very faint but his pointed ears seldom missed a sound. A short time later he heard talking downstairs. He figured Father Harris may have been to the kitchen and perhaps someone had stopped by requesting special prayer or something. He went back to thinking about Cynthia but a very short time later he heard Father Harris open his apartment door. "Wait, that can't be right?" Luke thought to himself as he threw back the cover and sat up on the edge of his bed.

Father Harris quietly made his way down the hall and descended the stairs to the lower level "Is someone there?" he called out. Nobody answered but he could see shadows down the hall. "You are trespassing! Who are you?" the vicar called out a moment before someone grabbed him from behind. A sinister voice snarled close to his ear "I want to know who you are?" The vicar struggled to get away as he replied "I am Father Harris. How dare you break into the house of God, what do you want?" The man pushed him forward as he replied "A little cash and it's my guess you can get it for us." The church was dark as the priest was forced down the hall and to his office. Someone inside his office switched on the overhead light just before he was shoved inside. "Where is it?" Paul asked. "Where is what?" the vicar played dumb. "Stop being stupid!" the man that had abducted him shouted. "Give us the money, now." Paul insisted. A third man stood by the metal cabinet. "It's in there." Father Harris pointed. The man tried to open the door and found it to be locked. "The key preacher, get it now." Paul sneered. "The treasurer has it." Father Harris attempted to deceive them. Paul walked up to the priest and got right in his face.

With a toothless grin he said “Well, you better have a spare.” Then he lifted his gun as he said “Be quick about finding it. We don’t have all night.” He then punched the vicar in the stomach which made him double over in pain and drop to his knees. “Move it preacher man!” Paul barked as he yanked the vicar back up to his feet. Father Harris went to his desk and got the key. Paul snatched it from his hand and tossed it to the man beside the cabinet. “Open it up Fred. If the money ain’t in there Mr. Holy Man here gets a bullet.” Fred opened the cabinet and pulled out the money bag “Got it boss.” Paul punched the vicar again making him collapse in pain. “What are we going to do with him?” Kevin asked. Paul sneered “Well, he’s seen too much and knows too much.” He then pulled his gun out again just as the overhead light went out. Kevin shrieked “What in the hell!” just before he was punched in the face. Paul moved the gun around trying to see in the dark when the gun was knocked from his hand. “Somebody shoot the bastard!” Kevin yelled. A shot was fired from Fred’s position followed by the sound of a struggle. Father Harris crawled to the office door and sat in the floor as he reached up for the light switch. The sound of punches and loud crashing continued as the vicar nervously tried to find the light switch. Another shot rang out and Father Harris flinched in fear. The noise ended just before he found the light switch. As the lights came back on he saw Luke standing over the three men. They were all unconscious and their guns lay on the floor near the desk. Luke had his back to the vicar as he stood there in his boxer shorts with his wings half way open and his tail twitching fiercely about. “Luke! My goodness, what have you done?” the vicar exclaimed. Luke replied “Stopping them from putting a bullet in your head. Are you okay?” The priest stood to his feet while holding his stomach “I think I’ll be okay. I need to call the police and you need to get some clothes on.” Luke nodded and rushed out the door. The vicar called the police then kicked the guns further away from the thieves. Luke returned with a tunic on and checked on the men to be sure they were still unconscious. “I had no idea you were so strong and fast.” Father Harris said to Luke as they heard the sound of sirens approaching. “It helps that I can see in the dark and they can’t.” Luke replied with a sly grin. Father Harris shook his head as he headed for the office door “I’ll need to let the officers in, keep a close watch on them.” Luke nodded that he would. The vicar switched on the hall lights as he headed for the side door. A few minutes later two officers followed Father Harris into the office. It was then that the vicar noticed the office was in complete disarray. He picked up the money bag and locked it back inside the cabinet. The officer aroused the men after putting handcuffs on them. Their guns were bagged as evidence. The

officer bagging the guns asked “Have either of you touched these?” Simultaneously Luke and the vicar replied “No sir.” Paul was the first to regain consciousness. He looked at Luke then at the vicar before mumbling “No freaking way.” A second team of officers arrived and escorted the men out as the first officers got a report from Father Harris of what had happened. “You’ll need to come down to the station and fill out a formal report in the morning.” “No problem.” Father Harris replied. Luke informed them that the burglar’s car was an old model sedan, silver in color with a lot of chipped and faded paint on the hood. “It smells like oil and makes a lot of noise. I think it’s parked on the street out back.” Luke then added. The second officer looked at Luke and said “We’ll look into it. So, you took all three of these guys out?” Luke nodded without comment. “Geez, you must be some kind of warrior monk.” The officer commented as he left the room. Father Harris was still holding his stomach. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Luke asked with concern. Father Harris replied “Yeah, just bruised. Could you lock up behind the officers and maybe find a piece of cardboard or something to put over that broken glass. I’ll get Mark to replace it in the morning.” Luke smiled “Let me get you to your room first then I’ll take care of it.” As Luke helped Father Harris to his room the priest asked “How did you learn to fight?” Luke replied “You told me to exercise in my room since I didn’t get out much. So I got Sister Elizabeth to find me a book on basic martial arts. I’ve been practicing and working out daily for years.” Father Harris jokingly said “So I guess you are a warrior monk.” Luke laughed then replied “Actually I was a bit clumsy, more like a stumbling ballerina.” Father Harris laughed then suddenly stopped. With a smile he said “Stop trying to be funny, it hurts when I laugh.” After getting the vicar settled in his bed Luke returned downstairs to lock up. The men had broken out a window pane in the back entrance. Outside Luke could see the thieves’ car being loaded onto a tow truck. He found a thin piece of plywood and a heavy duty staple gun in Mark’s workshop and covered the broken glass panel in the back door. After returning Mark’s staple gun he went to Father Harris’ apartment and made himself comfortable on the sofa.

“Luke, you didn’t need to sit up watching over me. I told you I was okay.” Father Harris said as he stepped out of his bedroom to find Luke on the sofa that morning. Luke sat up and responded “I wanted to be certain. I see you’re still holding your stomach. Don’t you think you might need to see a doctor?” Father Harris sat down in a chair and replied “I’m just bruised from being punched in the gut. It’ll be okay, Mr. Ninja.” Both of them burst into laughter. Later they called a

cab and went down to the police station to file the report. Everything went smoothly and Father Harris was given a court date if he wanted to be present. On their way out they ran into the first two officers that had responded to the call. "Thank you so much for getting there so quickly." Father Harris expressed his gratitude. "Not a problem, just doing our job." The officer replied. "By the way," the other officer began speaking "we found a lot of stolen goods in their car. We then sent a detective out to their address and found things on our list that had been taken over the past year. One of the guns checked out as being a weapon used in a murder six months ago. Thanks to you guys we can close files that had been sitting on our desk for some time." Luke stood silent as Father Harris replied "I'm glad that their sins have been revealed. Even if I did take a few punches for it." The first officer asked "Didn't the monk here do the fighting?" Father Harris replied with a grin "Friar Lucius didn't come to the rescue until after they had worked me over." The other officer commented "It's a good thing he showed up when he did. These guys are rough characters. Two of them have quite an extensive record of fighting and public disturbance. One has even served prison time for assault with a deadly weapon." Father Harris nodded and said "Let us know if you need anything further. We had best be on our way." Outside the precinct Father Harris turned to Luke and said "Did you hear that? They're hardened criminals. You could have been badly hurt or shot." Luke softly responded "It beats going to your funeral. They had the money and you saw their faces. You weren't about to leave that office alive." Father Harris replied "Yes, I guess you're right. I would have let them take the money but I had seen their faces. So I guess I owe you my gratitude." Luke smiled as he replied back "I get that every day, how about some lunch instead?" Father Harris thought a moment and remembered that they couldn't eat in a restaurant because Luke had to keep his hands hidden. "Let's swing by Papa Gene's Deli and pick something up on the way home." He suggested. Luke smiled and replied "That sounds good to me."

After several weeks had passed Luke sang for the congregation once again. Immediately following the service Cynthia approached Luke "Luke, I brought you a little something. It's not really anything but I made them myself and wanted to share with you." Luke looked down into the gift bag. "Thank you, that is very kind of you." Luke responded as he looked at the container of homemade brownies. They smelled almost as good as her perfume. "Oh I'm sorry. I didn't think to ask if you might be allergic to chocolate or nuts. Are you?" Cynthia asked as if

embarrassed. Luke jokingly replied “Not at all. If I were I wouldn’t have much reason to live.” Cynthia giggled and Luke’s heart melted. He caught her trying to look up under his hood to see his face and so he deliberately turned away. “I’m sorry if I offended you.” she quickly apologized. “It’s alright. I understand your curiosity. No offense taken.” Luke stated. She was quiet for a moment and things seemed to be getting awkward so Luke joked “You do realize I can’t see your face either.” Cynthia giggled again then said “You’re so sweet. Well, enjoy the brownies. I must be going; my parents are waiting for me.” Luke thanked her again for the gift. As she hurried off Luke noticed Cecil had been standing very close, just out of his view. He quickly looked at the body guard’s hand and he saw the small tattoo. Father Harris had not been mistaken. It was indeed the mark of a Vatican Guard.

Luke and the vicar enjoyed the brownies. As they snacked Father Harris began to talk “I’m a little concerned that the Montgomery girl may be getting too attached to you. Doesn’t that bother you considering the circumstances?” Luke finished swallowing before giving an answer “Honestly, it does but I enjoy talking with her. She’s always so kind to me. I also like the fragrance of her perfume. It smells like Jasmine.” Father Harris smiled understandingly. Luke continued. “When we talk it makes me wish I were normal and that I could leave this place. Maybe walk with her in the park and share more about our lives and other things.” Father Harris felt bad for Luke but such a relationship for the boy could never happen. If the girl should ever see him for what he is she would be terrified. “I think it best that you find a gentle way to separate yourself from her before it becomes a problem.” Father Harris suggested with a heavy heart. Luke replied sadly. “Perhaps but I will miss our little chats.” The following day Father Harris had a discussion with Sister Elizabeth regarding Cynthia Montgomery and Luke. “What did you expect of him? He’s becoming a man, it is only normal that he should have feelings for a young lady. His body and his mind are going through changes.” Sister Elizabeth responded. The vicar nodded that he understood what she was saying but then replied “I’ve spoken with him and I think he understands that courtship can never be a reality for him. Not just because of his deformities but the Montgomery family is very wealthy; their daughter’s choice of suitors would certainly be of concern for them. I don’t want the young lady or Luke to be broken hearted but we simply can’t change reality.” Sister Elizabeth bowed her head and she spoke “Yes, this is true. It is so sad but as you say, we must face the reality of the situation. I will attempt to keep

them separated as much as possible.” Father Harris gave the nun a weak smile and replied “I knew you’d understand. Thank you.”

In the weeks that followed Sister Elizabeth watched for Cynthia to approach Luke. She let them exchange a few words then interrupted and insisted that Luke needed to rest. Luke was wise to what the nun was doing and played along with her. “I appreciate what you’re doing.” Luke said to her one day as they headed back to his room after the service. “Oh, what is it that I am doing?” Sister Elizabeth pretended not to understand. “I think you know. It is for the best so I am not upset over it.” Luke responded. “Upset over what?” the nun persisted. “You’re distracting Cynthia away from me. You do it quite well I might add.” Luke replied with a smile. The nun knew she had been caught and confessed “Yes, you are correct. It pains me to admit it but a future between the two of you is out of the question. I think you understand why.” Luke patted Sister Elizabeth on the shoulder as he spoke “Yes, I do and I appreciate your assistance. Although I have grown fond of her, the last thing I wish to do is to cause her emotional distress.” Luke decided he needed to express some things to Cynthia. Things that the setting and short period of time in which they spoke would not suffice. He sat down at his desk one night and began to write. Despite his disfigured hands his script was quite elegant. Upon completion of his letter he sat back and read it slowly. *“Dearest Cynthia, You have always been so kind to me. It is hard to express how I feel about you because I am a monk. This will not change and I do not wish for it to change. I am pleased that my singing blesses you, as well as many others. My life is complicated due to my infirmities, which unfortunately will not change. It would be my wish that you continue to pray for me as I pray for you. Someday I hope that you’ll find someone as special as you are. That person will indeed need to be special to deserve you. As for me, I am content to feel the love of Christ and be surrounded by people that care about me. When you find that special someone I hope you will introduce him to me so that I may bestow my blessings upon him. Forever your friend, Luke.”*

Luke kept the letter hidden in the pocket of his tunic. When the Sunday came that it was his turn to sing he made sure he had it with him. After the service Cynthia made her way over to him in her usual manner. Her body guard Cecil was close behind. Luke quickly stuffed the note in her hand and said “I can’t speak today, please read this when you can. I think it will explain my

position in life.” Cynthia gave him a strange look and simply replied “Okay, I will.” Luke then turned and headed for the door. It caught Sister Elizabeth by surprise to see him leaving so soon. She had been distracted in a conversation with a sister nun who was visiting. “Luke is everything alright?” she called to him as she rushed to catch up. “Everything is fine. I just need to rest.” He replied. Sister Elizabeth caught up with him. “I see. Cynthia, I suppose?” she enquired. With a tear in his eye Luke responded “How did you ever guess?” The nun smiled. The boy she had raised was nobody’s fool and neither was she. It was obvious that he was heavy hearted. Sister Elizabeth knew Luke was going to have a difficult adolescence.

Cynthia came to Luke the following week immediately following the benediction. “I understand and forgive me for being so forward. I appreciate your letter. It was very kind; honesty is a much better gift than brownies.” Luke smiled, she did understand. “Take care of yourself.” She then said before walking away. Sister Elizabeth had been listening and slowly made her way over to Luke “If I may ask what that was about?” Luke smiled “I wrote her a letter explaining my situation and my commitment to the church. It expressed my desire for a friendship only relationship. She got the message.” Sister Elizabeth smiled and said “Well, aren’t you the wisest among us?” In the months to follow Cynthia continued to visit whenever Luke was singing. Occasionally she went out of her way to speak with him. Whenever she did the conversations were short and mostly about music. She was going to apply for Juilliard’s School of Music but seemed doubtful she would be accepted. There were other schools she was also considering. One of them was Juilliard’s sister school, the Winston-Salem School of the Arts. She felt like she might actually have a chance of getting accepted there. The school was in the south and further away than she wanted to be from her parents. She also surprised him with news that she had met a guy that she liked but that he was terrified of her father. They both laughed over the matter. Luke had no educational plans after receiving his G.E.D. He wasn’t able to use a computer for the on-line universities. His hands simply weren’t made for it. Cynthia promised to write to him when she went away to school. Luke smiled at the thought of being able to stay in contact with her. His heart was heavy at the thought of her being so far away.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Veil of Veronica

Father Harris got word that the burglars that had broken into the church had been released. A powerful lawyer had gotten them a very short sentence of only three months in jail. The assault charge on Father Harris had been dropped based on a false statement saying they had not instigated the violence. Also, they had taken nothing from the church therefore the only charge they faced was unlawful entry. A video on the local news showed the men leaving confinement. As Father Harris and Luke watched the footage a man in the background walked over to a limo and quickly ushered the men inside it. Luke gasped “That’s the man that was with Bishop Valero and Cardinal McKinley!” Father Harris sat up straight in his chair and looked closely as he replied “Kind of looks like him but surely not. Especially considering that those men are criminals.” The video ended and the next news story began. “I’m quite sure it was. Did you notice they got into a limo?” Luke asked. His sharp eyes rarely deceived him. “I’m sure there’s some logical explanation for it. A Vatican Guard would have no business with men like those.” Luke let the subject drop but he had an uneasy feeling about what he saw. Father Harris had Mark the caretaker to replace the side and back doors with heavier solid wooden doors without windows in them. Considering the break-in the finance committee quickly agreed to it. Within a few days they were in place with heavy dead bolt locks. This gave Father Harris a greater sense of security but Luke was skeptical. In the weeks that followed there were news reports of several break-ins within the wealthy communities. In one case the home owner was in serious condition resulting from a gunshot wound. Luke’s intuition told him that the same burglars were involved. Only now they had inside sources for breaking into homes with burglar alarms. In each case the alarm systems had been disabled.

Luke passed his final examine with a perfect score and received his diploma. The time for Sister Elizabeth to return to her convent had come. A small going away party was held for her but for Luke it was a sad occasion. He had relied on her for so many things. In many ways she was like a mother to him. “I’ll drop by for a visit from time to time.” She told Luke as the party came to a close. “You promise?” Luke asked. “Absolutely, I want to keep up with what my star pupil is up

to.” She assured him. After everyone had departed Father Harris saw that Luke was sad. “Son, tonight is not the end of things but rather the beginning.” He told the young monk. “I don’t understand, in what way?” Luke inquired. Father Harris patted Luke on the back and said “Follow me to my office. I have something to show you.” When they reached the office Father Harris pulled out a large old ledger as he spoke “The church now has the financial means to begin the day care program as well as a youth activity program. The finance committee was considering building a recreational center. However, we just found out that the produce distribution center across the street is relocating to a large facility at the end of the month. The church has decided to purchase the property. It will be renovated to accommodate both the day care program and the youth activity program. That means we can now start looking at the original intent for the land behind the church, which is currently a courtyard.” As the vicar opened the old ledger Luke stated “Original intent, I don’t understand.” Father Harris looked up and smiled as he continued “The original intent was to build a museum of ancient artifacts. We don’t currently have any holy relics that I’m aware of but in the cellar there are a vast number of ancient items, more than worthy of a museum. I want you to start going through those items. They are cataloged in this ledger. Although the description is vague regarding many of them I am hoping you can do some research to expand our knowledge of them.” Luke’s eyes opened wide as he exclaimed “Cellar, beneath the church? I had no idea!” Father Harris pulled a key from his desk as he spoke “I haven’t been down there but once since I was assigned to this parish. Now that school is over for you I can put you to work. The finance committee has already approved a small salary for your efforts. I’ve also ordered you a large laptop with touch screen and voice command. It was designed for the handicapped a few years ago. Although a bit expensive the finance committee understood the need for it. The task you are about to undertake has the potential to transform the ministry here at Saint Matthews.” Luke glanced over the large ledger which listed the items by number and provided a short description. “Come on; let’s go have a look, shall we?” Father Harris insisted as he picked up the ledger and tucked it under his arm. They swung by Mark’s workshop to pick-up a portable lantern. The vicar handed the ledger off to Luke. With the key in one hand and the battery powered lantern in the other he led Luke to the cellar entrance. Although the door was quite large and wide, Luke had never really noticed it before. It looked like it might be a storage closet or something of that manner. The vicar unlocked it and they proceeded down the long set of stairs. “Watch your step.” Father Harris

warned as he led the way with the lantern. At the bottom of the stairs Luke saw old torches mounted on the wall. Wooden crates of all shapes and sizes were stacked in numerical order down a long corridor. The passageway led to a large underground room filled with shelves between the support columns. Each one clearly numbered. "Wow, it looks like catacombs out of an old movie or something." Luke gasped. "The cathedral was built in seventeen forty two. Most of these items are from the mid fifteenth century up until the early eighteen hundreds. Perhaps a few items may be older than that." The vicar informed him. Luke marveled at what he was seeing and his heart fluttered with anxiety to get started. "I'll have Mark to run a heavy duty extension cord down here and set up some construction lighting so you can see better." Father Harris told him as they looked about. Luke saw a very decorative box that had a low profile. The length was approximately two feet. He read the number on it and checked the ledger. The description of the item was vague but Luke read it aloud for Father Harris "*Infinity rod; Florence, Italy, owned by a Knights Templar by the name of Jacques de Molay (1292-1314) Constructed by unknown Asian weapon designer under commission of Molay. Weapon is made entirely of nickel, including spring mechanism. Once used to deter angry mobs without causing fatal injury. Discovered in ruins of Roman bathhouse at Fiesole, Italy in fourteen ninety eight.*" The vicar replied "Fascinating, it's a metal club." as he opened the box. He lifted it out and handed it to Luke. "It's quite thick and heavy." Luke remarked as he held it up in the light. "It's very elegant as well." the vicar responded as they studied the beautiful engravings. As Luke rolled the thick metal rod around in his hand he noticed a large infinity symbol at the center. "The description said something about a spring mechanism." Father Harris stated as he looked at each end. Luke replied "Which means there has to be a button or switch." He pressed the center on one loop of the infinity symbol, it was a button but nothing happened. He pressed the other side and again nothing happened. Father Harris went back to studying the decorative box it was in. Luke looked the rod over once more then decided to press both sides of the infinity symbol at once. With a loud noise "Thwack, thwack, thwack, thwack!" the rod extended rapidly to form a long metal fighting stick, nearly eight feet in length. Both of them stood looking at it for nearly a full minute with their mouths open. "That is most impressive." Father Harris finally stated. Luke pressed the two buttons hidden within the infinity symbol once more. With the same sharp sound "Thwack, thwack, thwack, thwack!" it rapidly reduced itself back down to a two foot rod. Luke placed it back in the decorative box and began looking around at other things. After a while of

looking at other items Father Harris said “I really should be getting back to the office. Feel free to stay and explore. If you find any other interesting things let me know.” Luke held the light so the vicar could find his way up the stairs. With a sense of excitement Luke began opening other crates. He now had what he considered being the most fascinating job in the world. There were historical artifacts by the hundreds to examine and research. During his search through the items he came across what looked like a bag made from an animal bladder. *“Bullwhip; Rome, Italy, it is said to have been owned by one of the greatest trainer of gladiators in all of Rome. He himself was a slave that received freedom in his later years. Name and date unknown but believed to have been located at Ludus Gallicus. Item was discovered in the ruins of Roman slave quarters near the coliseum.”* Luke opened the bag and pulled it out. There was some sort of preserving grease within the bag that kept the leather whip soft and subtle. Luke laid it aside and was about to open another small crate when he heard Father Harris calling for him “Luke, it’s getting late!” He looked at the lantern and realized the light was getting dim. He had no idea how long he had been in the cellar. Reluctantly he put the ledger under his arm and grabbed the lantern. A few minutes later he was in his room still mesmerized by all he had seen. “I take it you got caught up in your work?” Father Harris asked as he stepped into Luke’s room. “Oh yes, very much so. There were so many fascinating and unusual things down there!” Luke exclaimed. The vicar smiled, he was pleased that his son had something to do that he enjoyed. “Your special laptop should be here within a few days. I’ll help you do the setup then you can get started with your in-depth research. You have several years to accomplish the task before we can even start the building. Once that is complete you’ll have to decide what to display and design the exhibit layout. Once that is done you’ll become the museum curator and perhaps acquire some more interesting things for us. So, take your time and enjoy it. You have a future here at Saint Matthews.” Father Harris informed his son. “I couldn’t be happier. I just wish Sister Elizabeth could see all of those things.” Luke replied. “Perhaps when she comes for a visit you can take her down to the cellar and show her a few items.” Luke smiled as he spoke “That would be great.” Father Harris leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on Luke’s forehead then smiled as he made his way out of the room.

Mark completed the job of getting Luke some light in the cellar and the young monk spent all his available time going through the crates. Two days later Luke was in the cellar finding more

incredible items when Father Harris called from the top of the stairs “Luke, you’re computer has arrived. Find a stopping place and come up here.” As much as Luke hated to stop he excitedly placed a black leather vesture of Roman dress armor back inside its crate and hurried up the stairs. Father Harris had the laptop up and running within the hour. He then instructed Luke on how to use the voice to text feature and the large glide pad controller. Father Harris then showed him how to connect to the church’s secure server and access the Internet for his research. He had a ledger book for Luke to number and record any extended information he could discover regarding their ancient artifacts. Luke was so excited he could hardly sit still during the process. “Okay, that’s it, if you have any problems or questions just let me know.” The vicar stated as he closed the computer. Luke thanked him and hurried back to the cellar with his laptop. Mark had extended the lighting further into the catacombs and provided a place to plug in his computer. Luke then went and found an unused table and chair and carried them to the cellar. “The boy loves his new job.” Father Harris commented to the caretaker as they watched Luke scrambled to get the table and chair down the stairs. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this excited over anything.” Mark replied. The two men chuckled and went about their business as Luke setup his work station.

Luke discovered that the leather armor he had been looking at earlier had belonged to a Roman general around the year four hundred and seventy A.D. The item was among the oldest of all the artifacts and extremely well preserved. The church had acquired it as a gift from Rome during the year of its consecration. Luke held it up in the light and marveled at the leather tooling on the breast plate. It was a gargoyle with its wings extended. On the back plate was tooled a papal cross with trefoils on the ends of the three horizontal segments as well as the vertical section. Luke softly gasped “Absolutely beautiful.” With the breast plate were matching arm guards and leg guards. The computer proved extremely helpful in finding more details on many of the artifacts. Another fascinating item was a Spartan helmet; carbon dating had estimated it to be from the time of the Persian invasion of Greece. The helmet had been acquired by Saint Matthews from a cathedral in Paris, in the mid eighteen hundreds. Days turned to weeks, and then months as Luke added to the extended ledger for the artifacts. Father Harris began to get quite excited himself as he looked through Luke’s progress. “This is going to make an incredible collection of artifacts for the museum!” Father Harris exclaimed as he flipped a page. “I still

have a lot more to go through.” Luke responded as he was setting the table in the vicar’s apartment for their dinner. The two of them always had breakfast and dinner together.

One day as Luke was deep into his research Father Harris called from the top of the stairs “Luke, would you mind if we joined you for a few minutes?” Luke called back to him “Sure, come on down!” As he turned back to the latest item of interest he thought “we”. He stood up and pulled his hood back over his head. A minute later Father Harris entered the cellar with Sister Elizabeth close behind him. “Sister Elizabeth!” Luke exclaimed as he went to hug her. “Oh my goodness, what an endless array of boxes and crates. Father Harris told me these are all filled with ancient artifacts.” She stated as she looked around. “Yes and some of them are truly amazing.” Luke replied with a smile. Luke showed the nun the Infinity rod and a few other items. As Luke was putting the Spartan helmet away Sister Elizabeth softly whispered to Father Harris “I do believe he loves what he’s doing.” Luke’s pointed ears heard her but he didn’t let them know. When it was time for the nun to leave Luke followed her out to catch the bus. After waving goodbye he headed back to the cathedral. “Hey freak!” a young man shouted from across the street. Luke ignored him and return to the church without confrontation.

Luke continuously worked on researching the artifacts and antiques. A beautiful dagger was discovered from the late eighteen hundreds. Luke frowned as he read the ledger *“Dagger; Rome, Italy. One of the first daggers presented to the Vatican Guard. Its purpose was for discreet defense of the Pope. Date: fifteen o-six, the Swiss Guard of the Vatican is the only Swiss Guard that is still active today. The protective unit was founded by Pope Julius II. Although armed with these daggers many guardsmen died protecting Pope Clement VII during the looting of Rome during fifteen twenty-seven.”* Luke looked the dagger over closely. The slim blade was razor sharp although it had been in storage for centuries. The ornate handle had several holy symbols on it. The hilt itself was oval and was adorned with a papal cross identical to the one on the back of the leather armor he had researched months earlier. The dagger was in a leather sheath with what appeared to be buckled straps for attaching the dagger to one’s forearm or lower leg. “That makes sense, hiding their weapons to appear harmless. I bet they still do that.” Luke muttered to himself as he wrote down the information in the new ledger. It was getting near dinner time but Luke decided to open one more crate. It was rather small and he didn’t expect it to contain

anything of great importance. The crate was not numbered, nor was there any mention of it in the ledger. As Luke opened the crate he realized that extreme care had been taken in wrapping the item, much more so than anything else he had unpacked. There was a note written on papyrus paper lying on top of a piece of fabric. The note was written in Italian. Luke immediately used his laptop to translate the note. As he read the translation his eyes bulged in disbelief *"The Veil of Veronica, also known as the Volto, this piece of cloth bears the likeness of the face of Jesus, yet not made by human hands. It is said that Saint Veronica encountered Christ along the Via Dolorosa and wiped the blood and sweat from his face with this veil. The image of Jesus' face was mystically transferred to the fabric. It is said to have incredible power such as giving sight to the blind and raising the dead."* Luke stared in disbelief then he entered the data into his computer and read from the search results "Veil of Veronica, Lost Holy Roman Catholic Relic; publicly paraded and displayed by [Pope Innocent III](#) in twelve ninety-seven. It was last displayed publicly in fifteen o-seven; the veil vanished during the sacking of Rome in fifteen twenty-seven. In sixteen-sixteen Pope Paul V prohibited the creation of copies after many surfaced and he also ordered all forgeries to be destroyed. The fate of the true veil is unknown." Luke could hardly breathe as his mind whirled with many thoughts, *"Was it possible that this was actually the real Veil of Veronica? Did Saint Matthews have possession of an actual Holy Roman Catholic Relic? Did the veil actually have the power to raise the dead?"* Luke replaced the crate packaging and closed it. If this was indeed the true Veil of Veronica many churches would try to claim they rightfully owned it. The Pope would certainly demand to examine it. If it was found to be authentic then it would most likely be locked away in the Vatican vault. Anything with the power to raise the dead would attract professional thieves from every nation. Even governments would attempt to get their hands on it, possibly even going to war to acquire such an item! "Luke, dinner is ready!" Father Harris called down the stairway. "Be right there!" Luke called back as he snatched up the crate and took it deeper into the catacombs to hide it. *"Nobody can ever know of this."* Luke thought as he pushed the small crate behind a number of empty crates.

Luke couldn't get his mind off of what he had found as he and Father Harris ate their dinner. "How's the meatloaf?" the vicar asked when he noticed that his son seemed distant. "Oh, it's good, very good." Luke replied. Father Harris watched Luke quietly as his son's mind wondered off again. "Is there something bothering you?" he asked Luke as he laid his fork down. Luke

looked up into his father's eyes and replied "Is it that noticeable?" After a pause he then asked the vicar "If you discovered something that was truly unique and said to be very powerful, would you tell anyone one else about it?" Father Harris studied Luke's question a moment then replied "I guess that would depend on what the item was. A weapon, a poison, a large sum of gold, it depends." Luke's mind was still undecided on what to tell Father Harris. "Would this item cause problems?" Father Harris asked with concern. Luke nodded "Big problems I'm afraid." The priest pushed back from the table "What have you found down there Luke, you know you can trust me?" Luke sighed then said "Let's finish our dinner and then I'll show you." Father Harris responded with a smile "As you wish. I certainly wouldn't want anything to spoil my appetite." Luke smiled back. After finishing their meal and cleaning off the table the two men headed for the cellar. Luke had Father Harris to wait near the light as he retrieved the small crate. As he returned to the light carrying the crate he began to talk "You'll notice this crate is much older than all the others. The wood is very fragile. It's made differently and handmade nails were used to construct it. There was no number on it and it isn't mentioned in the ledger." Luke then opened the crate carefully and handed the papyrus note to Father Harris. The priest held the note into the light as he handled it carefully. "I'm afraid my Italian is quite rusty but I think it says something about the Veil of Veronica." Luke had memorized the note and replied "The Veil of Veronica, also known as the Volto, this piece of cloth bears the likeness of the face of Jesus, yet not made by human hands. It is said that Saint Veronica encountered Christ along the Via Dolorosa and wiped the blood and sweat from his face with this veil. The image of Jesus' face was mystically transferred to the fabric. It is said to have incredible power such as giving sight to the blind and raising the dead." Luke carefully lifted the delicate fabric up into the light and the vicar gasped "It can't be! The Veil of Veronica has been lost for centuries!" Luke replied "Until now. How it got here I don't know but I believe it was deliberately hidden here long ago to protect it. If anyone finds out about this veil the Vatican will surely confiscate it. We can't display it in the museum or it will be called a fake and there are standing orders since sixteen-sixteen by Pope Paul V which prohibited the creation of copies and that all fakes are to be destroyed. The Vatican will assume it's a fake then order that it be destroyed based on that ruling. However, if it has the power that the legend says it has, then nations would go to war to acquire it." Father Harris watched as Luke careful repacked the delicate fabric. He was speechless. "I think it best we hide it away down here once more to keep it safe." Luke

suggested. Father Harris nodded “I agree. Something like that would certainly stir up a bee hive of controversy.” Luke placed the note back into the crate and refastened the lid. “Put it back where you had it and tell no one about it. Also, don’t list it in the new ledger.” Father Harris stated as he rubbed his forehead. Luke took the crate back into the dark corner of the catacombs and hid it away once again. When he returned Father Harris was sitting down. “Are you okay?” Luke asked out of concern. “I’m fine, just a little overwhelmed by what you’ve found. It’s truly amazing.” Luke nodded in agreement and said “It’s beyond amazing. If it’s real and I believe it is, the power over death is at our disposal.” Father Harris answered back “Not just death, it is said to have power over any infirmity, guided by the prayer given for its use. Which means Luke, that it may have the power to make you normal.” Luke was shaken, he had not given that matter any thought. He paused as he pondered on the matter. If the veil was real he could have a normal life with Cynthia. He could walk the streets without his face being covered. He would have normal hands and feet. Yet, this was the only life he had ever known. It honestly frightened him to go out into the world. He finally responded firmly “No. I am what God made me and I’m fine with it for now.” Father Harris nodded then said “Well, it will be here if you ever change your mind.” Luke nodded back to the vicar then the two of them went back upstairs and turned off the light. The following day would be another busy one for Luke. More crates with mysterious items were yet to be discovered.

“Paul, I got a call from our new boss.” Kevin stated as his partner in crime entered the door to their new hideout. “Yeah, what did he say?” Paul asked as he closed the large metal door to the warehouse. “He’s got a big job for us in a few days. You, Fred, and I will be splitting a million bucks if all goes to plan.” Paul walked over and sat down at the table as he responded with questions “A million huh? Did he mention what the job involved?” Kevin shook his head as he replied “No, just said he’d be by later tonight to give us the details.” Paul nodded and said “Okay, I could use a third of a million, how about you?” Kevin laughed “Are you kidding? If this works out I’m retiring and moving to Florida!” Paul looked over at Fred who was playing a game of solitaire and asked “What about you?” Fred looked up and replied “I want to hear what the job involves before I decide if I’m in. That’s a lot of money which means more risk. The security guard at that last job nearly blew my head off.” Paul chuckled then Kevin commented “Yeah, you know that high tech stuff we took was worth a lot of money. Which means the boss

got a much bigger cut than we did and he wasn't even there." Paul responded immediately "I was thinking about that earlier today. Do you think it's possible that our new boss has a boss of his own? He could be a middle man between us and some king pin." Kevin tilted his head and gave it some thought as Fred went back to playing cards. After a moment Kevin stated "I think you're right Paul, I heard him talking on his mobile phone a few days ago. It sounded like he might be answering to someone." Paul then asked "Did you ever ask him about that little tattoo on his hand?" Kevin replied "Yeah I did, he just said it was none of my concern." Fred chuckled and laid his cards down "That sounds like to me he's hiding something, like maybe that tattoo is some kind of cattle brand or something. Like maybe Mr. Fancy Pants' ass belongs to somebody." Paul and Kevin burst out laughing at Fred's comment. "I'm getting another beer after that one!" Kevin chuckled. As Kevin got up and headed for the refrigerator Paul called out "Grab me one while you're over there!" Fred's request quickly followed "Yeah, grab me one too!"

Later that evening Paul, Kevin and Fred waited for their boss to arrive. They had been robbing the homes of the rich as well as commercial businesses for months. During this time they had little knowledge of the man they called "The Boss". He arrived shortly after eight that evening. "Good evening gentlemen, I imagine you're eager to find out what our next job will be?" he stated coldly as he adjusted the collar of his jacket. "Yeah," Paul replied "What's worth a million bucks to us and how close are we going to get to death's door before it's done?" The well dressed man smiled as he responded "Three simple steps. First we make a well planned abduction. Secondly we make an offer to return the merchandise for a healthy sum within three days. Thirdly, we pick up the money and drop off the merchandise." Fred stood up suddenly as he inquired "You're talking about a kidnapping, aren't you?" The man gave Fred a sly smile as he simply answered "Yes." Paul then asked "Who?" The man replied "A young lady, daughter to a multi-millionaire." Kevin then stood and asked angrily "Who's going to pick up the cash, huh? I want to know because that fool is going to have the cops waiting to put a bullet in his freaking head!" The mysterious man raised his hands and motioned for them to calm down. Once Fred and Kevin were seated he explained "First of all, if the cops get involved the man will never see his daughter again. If he doesn't follow the drop off instructions to the letter he won't be seeing his daughter again. If he refuses to pay the money he'll never see her again. So, I'll arrange the pick up because you know he's going to pay up. No father is going to risk putting his daughter in

danger. You guys will then receive a call with instructions to take her to a drop off point. Or, if things go sideways you'll get a call to put a bullet in her head and dump her in the river. So, like I said, three steps." Paul, Fred and Kevin looked back and forth at one another deciding if they wanted to get involved. "Look guys, I'll be taking the risk picking up the money. I'll also be making the arrangements for the grab and go, it'll be easier than you can imagine." Paul then asked "What if the old man refuses to pay up?" Their boss smiled and shrugged his shoulder as he replied "Then you guys can have a little fun with her before you shoot her and dump the body. We'll then pick a new target and try again." Kevin smiled at the thought of getting hold of a young girl. He hadn't enjoyed any intimate attention since his wife had left him, with the exception of a couple of prostitutes. "Where are we going to hold her for three days?" Fred asked with concern. The well dressed man stood and inquired "You mean to tell me that you gentleman have been here for over a week now and haven't looked around this place? Not even out of simple curiosity?" They all shook their head that they hadn't. Kevin finally said "We have a kitchenette as well as a large bathroom complete with a shower stall right here in the front of the building. There are also three little rooms to bunk in; we didn't need to go snooping around." The man stated simply "Come with me." as he stood and began walking toward the back of the warehouse. They all got up and followed him toward the darker end of the building. When they reached the back of the building they saw several large cargo doors. "This way gentlemen." Their mysterious boss said as he walked toward a set of steps that led downward. The flight of stairs was surrounded by safety metal railing. The man flipped on a light switch. When the fluorescent lighting turned on they revealed a row of office rooms and another bathroom. "Over here." Their boss stated as he opened a door. They all stepped into the room with the strange man. "This, my friends will be her holding room. It can be locked from the outside and has a small bathroom within it. Three days from the snatch we either release her or shoot her. You'll only need to toss her some food and water from time to time. It's a perfect set up. Being underground nobody can hear her scream or yell. There aren't many people coming and going in this neighborhood anyway as you've probably already noticed. Most of the warehouses in this area are used to file old tax documents which are rarely ever needed. So, the risk of holding her here are minimal. Now, are there any more questions?" Paul looked over at Kevin who then looked over at Fred. There weren't any questions to be asked. "Very well then, I assume you're all in?" The man asked. Paul confirmed with the others and replied "Yeah, we're all in." Their

boss then led the way out. Upon reaching the front of the warehouse the large strange man stated “You’ll be getting a call with the pickup instructions within a day or two, be ready.” He then walked out and got into his black luxury sedan and drove away. “Okay guys, now we play the waiting game.” Paul stated.

Two days later Kevin’s phone rang. Their boss was on the other end giving instructions, “Be at the Catholic school on the north end of town at three o’clock sharp. Look for a pretty young blonde girl in a bright blue sweater. She’ll have a medium blue backpack and blue sneakers. She’ll be waiting for her ride home, which will not show up. Quickly grab her, toss her in the van and take off. While on the move you’ll tape her mouth shut, and restrain her hands. You’ll then take her to the warehouse and lock her in the holding room. You might want to grab some dinner before you pick her up so you won’t have to go back out. Once you take her inside one of you should park the van further down the street away from the warehouse as a precaution. You’ll need to lay low for a few days. Got it?” Kevin replied “We got it.” They pulled out at two o’clock and swung by a fast food restaurant and picked up their dinner as well as something for the girl. At five minutes to three they parked a block away and got everything ready. Paul would be driving; Fred and Kevin would make the snatch and get her secured in the back of the van. At exactly three o’clock the van slowly approached the front of the school. “That must be her.” Kevin pointed out to Paul. “Yep, blonde hair, light blue sweater, medium blue backpack and blue sneakers. You guys ready?” Paul asked. Kevin replied “Ready, pull up to her and stop.” As soon as the van stopped Kevin and Fred jumped out and grabbed the young lady. They rapidly jumped back into the van and slammed the door as Paul stepped on the gas. Kevin taped the girl’s mouth shut as Fred secured her hands. The girl’s eyes revealed her terror. Fred frightened her more by waving a gun in her face as he spoke “Any trouble out of you and it’s going to be bye-bye time, understood?” The girl closed her eyes as her body trembled in fear.

Luke had just come out of the cellar when Father Harris called out “Luke, come in here, hurry!” As Luke entered the vicar’s office the television was broadcasting a breaking news story. A female news anchor began speaking, “It has been reported to police that Cynthia Montgomery, young daughter of the furniture tycoon Raymond Montgomery has been abducted. The family has received a ransom call demanding three million dollars within three days for her safe return.

Cynthia's body guard failed to pick her up at school today and it is believed that he may have fallen victim to foul play. School cameras recorded a faded blue van with old lettering on the side just moments before the abduction. The lettering was too faded and worn off to be distinguishable. The vehicle's tag number was not obtained. More on this story as we become updated." Luke was on his feet and his heart was racing. "This is terrible!" Father Harris declared in shock. "What can we do to help?" Luke asked in a panic. Father Harris stood up and placed his hand on Luke's shoulder "Son, there isn't anything we can do but pray for her and her family. Hopefully the police will spring a trap to catch the kidnappers and find her safe." Luke felt sick to his stomach. He had never felt so helpless in his life. He refused to eat anything the remainder of the day and Father Harris began to worry about him. Luke paced the floor in his room too upset to sit down. He was trying to think of some way to help poor Cynthia. That night he tossed and turned in his bed until he cried himself to sleep. The next morning he ate a small breakfast then returned to his room. As much as he loved researching the artifacts his heart was simply not into it. Luke couldn't help but worry about Cynthia's well being. She was his dearest friend. He prayed off and on throughout the day. Father Harris watched the news but nothing new was being disclosed. That afternoon Raymond Montgomery and his wife came to the church with police escorts. Luke was questioned as if he was a suspect but the Police quickly realized he had nothing to do with the abduction. "Father Harris, may I have a word with you in private?" Raymond requested of the vicar. Once in the office Raymond confessed that his business had been going under for the past five years and much of the company's savings had been used to keep it afloat. He was in hopes of selling it off but the poor economy was preventing any buyers from coming forward. He simply didn't have three million dollars readily available. "The police are putting together a sting operation but I've been warned that police interference would get Cynthia killed." Raymond finished with his details of the situation. "Oh my, this is terrible news. Luke and Cynthia are friends, at least here at the church they are. He's been worried sick over her since we found out. I'm sure you and your wife are beyond terrified of what may happen." Father Harris stated sadly. "I've inquired with the banks for a loan but under the circumstances they can't risk losing their money." Raymond informed the vicar. "May I pray with you and your wife?" Father Harris asked. Raymond replied through his tears "Yes, certainly." Father Harris gathered Raymond and his wife Betty at the altar and began to pray. Luke was at the back of the sanctuary but his ears had heard every word spoken. With tears running down his face he rushed

down the aisle to join them in prayer. When the prayer had ended Luke began to sing softly without any music ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel’, a song often sung during Advent. It was a song of waiting with hope. By the time he finished singing there were tears streaming down his face. The family thanked him for the song before leaving. Father Harris didn’t have the heart to tell Luke that the family didn’t have the money needed to pay Cynthia’s ransom. If the sting operation the police were planning failed they may never see Cynthia alive again. Father Harris retired to his room to pray, hope was all they had left.

The following day was cloudy and overcast adding to the misery that Luke felt. He brought a few items up from the catacombs and into his room that brought him comfort. He had the Infinity rod, the leather armor, the bullwhip, and the Spartan helmet. He went on-line and tried to find more information on the items to help occupy his mind. It was of little use, his heart was simply not into researching so he put the items in his closet for the time being. As the evening approached there was slight mist falling. Luke stood on the balcony watching over the traffic and shops as twilight approached. His heart was as gloomy as the weather. Downstairs Father Harris received a call from Bishop Valero regarding the abduction. “I understand that the Montgomery family has often visited your parish over the past several months.” He politely inquired. “Yes, the young girl enjoyed hearing Luke sing. The boy is absolutely sick over the news and has spent much time in prayer over her.” Father Harris informed the bishop. “Well, prayer is about all any of us can do. I’m sure the family can afford the ransom and she’ll be home safe and sound before you know it.” Bishop Valero replied. “Unfortunately that’s not the case. Their furniture business is barely staying afloat these days due to the poor economy. Mr. Montgomery has been working with the banks trying to get a loan but that isn’t looking very promising.” The vicar informed the bishop. “Oh my, that is tragic.” The bishop responded coldly. “Their only real hope is that the police are able to pull off a successful sting operation before anything bad happens to Cynthia.” Father Harris sadly informed his superior. “I see, well let us all stay hopeful in prayer and trust the Lord to intervene.” Bishop Valero stated before ending the call. Father Harris sat quietly in his favorite reading chair and prayed once more for Cynthia’s safe return.

“How’s our guest doing?” Paul asked Fred as the big man returned to the front of the warehouse. “She’s rather quiet. I think she’s praying for a hero or something.” Fred replied in a cynical manner. Kevin responded harshly “Hah, little good that’s going to do her. She better pray her old man comes up with the cash.” Paul added with a sly grin “She also better pray the police don’t get involved.” Kevin went to the kitchenette and returned with a beer for each of them. “If things go sideways I get first go at her.” He sneered as he sat the beer on the table while rubbing his crotch. “I hope she claws your freaking eyes out.” Paul joked. Fred laughed but didn’t comment. “One more day boys and we’ll either be rich or dumping a body in the river.” Paul stated bluntly before taking a swallow of his beer. “I prefer the money. It’d be a shame to mess the little lady up.” Fred responded. “Listen to yourself jackass! You sound like you’re getting all sentimental or something. If things go bad we pop a cap in her head and toss her in the river. That’s the plan. If we don’t do it then the parents of the next little lady we snatch won’t take us seriously, got it?” Paul snapped viciously at Fred. “I didn’t mean it like that, fool!” Fred rebuked his partner in crime. Kevin started laughing then said “Listen to you guys, fighting over a girl, how touching!” Fred threw his half empty beer can at Kevin who quickly dodged it. “Knock it off, that’s enough!” Paul yelled in frustration. Fred got up and went to his room. A few minutes later Kevin whispered to Paul “We better keep a watch on him. He’s getting a soft spot for the girl and you know it. He just may set her free and screw everything up.” Paul gave Kevin a hard look then replied “You may be right. From now on you and I will do the checking on her. Let’s keep them apart. We have just one more day to deal with this mess and I don’t want any problems. I got a feeling the boss will slit our throats if we mess this up.” Kevin nodded in agreement as the thought of ripping the girl’s clothes off entered his mind. He would like to get the money then have a go at the young lady before releasing her.

**Purchase the complete novel and continue
reading Friar Luke’s incredible tale!**

[Disfigured Angel \(A Grimdark Urban Fantasy\) by W. Wright, Barnes & Noble® \(barnesandnoble.com\)](http://barnesandnoble.com)

Chapter six
Leap of Faith!