

SECOND CHANCES

A SONG OF LIFE



A Novel by
E.F. YOUNG

SECOND CHANCES

by E. F. Young

"God had taken Eddie's shattered heart and used it to keep Sarah's beating. One life lost. One life saved. Not replacement. Not closure. Just God taking what was meant to destroy him and somehow, impossibly, using it to save someone else." From the epilogue.

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CONTENT WARNING: This novel deals with themes of suicide, mental illness, and emotional abuse. While the story affirms hope and life, some content may be distressing.

If you or someone you know is struggling: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988.

This story presents both spiritual and medical perspectives on mental health. The characters' experiences are their own and do not represent the only approach to these complex issues.

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FROM THE AUTHOR

The eBook is free to share and distribute. If “Second Chances” brings you hope, please share it with anyone struggling with grief, loss, or despair. Stories save lives.

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Chapter 1: The Invisible Boy

October 1999 - South Boston, Massachusetts

"Eddie, please. Don't do this." Evie's voice cracked. "He's just... he's wearing me down. I caught him staring into my room last night from the tree outside my window. Just standing there in the branches like some kind of... I don't know. I called the police, but he was gone when they got there."

Eddie Marcello leaned against the hood of Vinnie's Civic, fingers tapping out a rhythm on his thigh. Same beat he'd been working on all week, the one that kept slipping away every time he tried to pin it down with actual chords.

Evie stood three feet away, arms crossed, staring at her flip phone as if it might ring with news she didn't want to hear. Her breath formed small clouds in the air between them.

"So can you meet me tonight?" Eddie asked. "Bowling alley. Eight o'clock."

She didn't look up. "I'd better stay in."

"Why?"

"Because that's Jake's place, Eddie. His father owns it. You know that."

Eddie did know that. Jake's father owned half of Quincy, it seemed like. The bowling alley, two gas stations, and a strip mall out by the Expressway. He had the kind of money that bought lawyers and made problems disappear.

"Good," Eddie said, and meant it. "I want him to see me there. On his turf. Let him know I'm not hiding."

Evie finally looked at him. Her eyes were different from what they'd been two months earlier, back in August, when they'd first started dating, when she'd laughed at his terrible jokes and stolen fries off his plate at 'Kelly's Roast Beef.' Now something had been carved out of her. Hollowed. As if she'd been holding her breath for so long that she'd forgotten what oxygen felt like.

"Never call the police," he said, sharper than he intended. "Unless you want your business all over the neighborhood by morning."

Evie flinched.

Eddie softened his voice. "What'd your dad say?"

"He's hiring private security. Someone to watch the house at night."

"That's good. That's smart."

But even as he said it, Eddie wondered what good private security would do against someone who could stand in a tree for hours, motionless as a gargoyle, watching. Waiting. Jake had that kind of patience that felt less like human restraint and more like something reptilian. Cold-blooded. Eddie had seen it in Jake's eyes once, back in September, when they'd passed each other in the hall at school. Jake had smiled. Not a normal smile. Something slower.

Silence stretched between them now. Down the parking lot, someone's car stereo thumped bass through closed windows, DMX or maybe Ja Rule. A group of freshman girls walked past, sharing a single pair of headphones, laughing about something Eddie couldn't hear and wouldn't have understood anyway. Normal high school stuff. He used to think his life was normal, too.

"I'm still going," Eddie said. "Tonight. Eight o'clock. You don't have to be there, but I am."

"Why? What are you trying to prove?"

"That he doesn't get to win."

Evie's face did something complicated. Not quite a smile, not quite a grimace. "He already won, Eddie. The second I started being afraid to go outside, afraid to check my phone, or look out my own window at night. He won."

"Eddie wanted to argue, to tell her Jake was a coward who'd fold the second someone stood up to him. That this whole nightmare would be over by morning if Eddie could just look him in the face and make him understand Evie wasn't alone."

But he could see it in her face; she wasn't asking for a solution. She was asking him not to make it worse.

"Can you just..." She trailed off, looked away. "Can you get Vinnie to give me a ride home? I'll call you later."

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. Tell your dad the security's a good idea. That guy's deranged."

"I know." Evie's voice went small, thin as paper. "How could I have been so stupid? Dating him in the first place?"

"You weren't stupid."

"I was. I am." She turned toward the school entrance where Vinnie was supposed to meet them. "I'll text you later."

Eddie watched her go. He wanted to follow, but didn't. His pager buzzed against his hip, Vinnie's number followed by 911. Emergency code for "stuck somewhere, gonna be late."

Great. More time standing here like a target while Jake probably sat in his BMW somewhere across the street, engine idling, windows tinted dark enough to hide whatever expression he wore as he watched.

Eddie scanned the parking lot. The usual collection of beat-up Chevys and Toyotas, with duct tape holding bumpers on and Bruins stickers peeling off the back windows. One Lexus belonged to some kid whose father owned most of the town. Nothing resembling Jake's car, the black BMW with Massachusetts custom plates that read PREDATOR.

But that didn't mean anything. Jake was smart. Careful in the way spiders are careful, knowing exactly how much tension each strand of web could hold, exactly where to position himself to feel the vibrations when something stumbled into the silk.

Eddie pulled out his phone, thought about calling Vinnie, and decided against it. Vinnie was probably still stuck with Maloney, doing paperwork for whatever detention he'd earned this week. Fighting with Murphy again, probably. Or Jones. Someone who thought Vinnie's size was an invitation to test their luck.

Instead, Eddie just stood there, the cold working deeper into his bones, and felt that familiar weight settling over him. That sense that something was watching. Not Jake, or not just Jake. Something older. Something that had been watching long before Jake climbed that tree, long before Evie's eyes went hollow, long before Eddie picked up a guitar and thought music might save him from drowning in this city.

Lately, the feeling had been intensifying. The air grew heavier, as if an invisible pestilence had been slowly thickening since the start of the school year.

Eddie shook it off. Probably just a lack of sleep. He'd been up until three last night working on that melody, trying to nail down the chord progression that kept slipping through his fingers like smoke.

His phone rang, the actual ring, not just a text. Vinnie.

"Yeah?"

"Stuck for another ten," Vinnie said, voice tight with barely controlled irritation. "Maloney's being a jerk about the paperwork. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Evie's waiting inside."

"Jake show up?"

"Not yet."

"He will." Vinnie was quiet for a second. Eddie could hear voices in the background, Maloney droning about consequences and responsibility and all the other words adults used when they'd already decided you were guilty. "Listen, you stay visible, okay? Don't go nowhere you can't be seen. I'll be there soon as I can."

"I'm fine, Vin."

"I know you're fine. Just stay that way."

The line went dead.

Eddie flipped the phone shut and shoved it back in his pocket. The sun was starting to sink behind the buildings, turning the October sky that particular shade of orange that always made Eddie think of things ending, summer dying. The light fading. Giving up.

The year rolling over into the part where everything went gray and cold, and the dark came earlier every day until you couldn't remember what warmth felt like.

He pulled out his guitar pick, the heavy one, the Dunlop tortoiseshell he got from Guitar Center back in July, and turned it over in his fingers. Smooth on one side, textured on the other. Real. Solid. Something to hold onto when everything else felt like it was dissolving.

A car door slammed somewhere behind him.

Eddie turned.

Nothing. Just the usual afternoon exodus of kids heading to after-school jobs or home or wherever kids went when they were done pretending to care about trigonometry and the Revolutionary War.

But the feeling was back, that sense of being watched. Of something standing just outside his peripheral vision, patient as a sloth, waiting for him to look away.

Eddie kept his eyes moving. Scanning. The way Vinnie had taught him to do back when they were kids, and Pop would come home drunk, looking for something to break. Never stare at one thing too long. Keep moving. See everything. Then you can't be surprised.

The school doors opened, and Vinnie came out, backpack slung over one shoulder, jaw set in that way that meant Maloney had really gotten under his skin this time. Evie followed a few steps behind, arms still crossed, phone still clutched in her right hand.

"Ready?" Vinnie called.

Evie nodded.

Eddie pushed off the hood, grabbed his guitar case from where he'd leaned it against the tire. The case was covered in stickers, bands he'd seen at the 'Rat' before it closed in '97, local acts that had maybe played three shows before fading back into South Boston obscurity. The guitar inside was a used Fender Strat he'd saved eight months to buy, working doubles at Dom's pizza place, pocketing tips until he had enough to walk into 'Daddy's Junky Music' and walk out with something that made sounds that gave him hope. Maybe his music could help him escape the creeping danger on the streets of Southie.

Nobody said anything on the drive to Evie's house. Vinnie had the radio on, Glen Ordway doing his afternoon show, talking about the Celtics game coming up Sunday. Eddie wasn't listening. He watched the streets roll past, the afternoon light catching the edges of buildings, turning brick into something almost beautiful for a few minutes before the sun dropped too low and everything went gray again.

Evie sat in the back, staring out the window. Eddie could see her reflection in the side mirror, pale, drawn, like she hadn't slept in days. They pulled up to her driveway, the long one with actual landscaping and trees planted in deliberate patterns.

Evie grabbed her bag. "Thanks," she said. Voice flat. Empty.

Vinnie twisted around. "You want me to walk you in? Check the windows, make sure nothing looks off?"

"My dad's home. I'm fine."

She wasn't fine. Eddie could hear it in the way her voice had gone transparent, like she was speaking from the bottom of a well.

She stepped out, and they observed her walking up the driveway of a house with columns on the front porch, shutters that could actually close, and a doorbell likely ringing a melody instead of just buzzing.

Eddie had been there a few times. Back in August, before Jake started showing up in trees. He remembered the smell, not bad, just different. Clean. Like lemon furniture polish. The living room had paintings on the walls. Real ones, in frames, not posters held up with thumbtacks. And books, shelves and shelves of books that looked like people had actually read them.

His own living room had a crucifix on the wall next to the TV, the Italian kind, brass and detailed, Christ's agony rendered in miniature, and a coffee table with cigarette burns Ma kept trying to hide with doilies. That was it. No paintings. No books except the phone book and Ma's missal from church, the one she hadn't opened since Easter Sunday.

"She's not fine," Eddie said as Evie disappeared through the front door.

"I know."

"We gotta do something."

Vinnie put the car in reverse, backed out of the driveway slow and careful. "What you wanna do, Eddie? Beat the guy up? Get arrested? That gonna help her?"

"Better than doing nothing."

"Pop already does enough nothing for the whole family." Vinnie's voice went flat and hard. "Sitting on that couch every night, working through whatever jug of Gallo he got on sale at Blanchard's, yelling at the TV like the Bruins can hear him through the screen. We're not gonna be him. Capisce?"

"Capisco."

Eddie stared out the window. They were heading back toward Southie now, leaving behind the nice neighborhood with its clean streets and working streetlights. Heading back to the three-deckers and corner stores and chain-link fences, the part of Boston where things broke and stayed broken because nobody had the money or the energy to fix them.

Past the projects on D Street, where laundry hung from fire escapes, even though it was October and nothing would dry in this cold. Past St. Augustine's, with its crooked fence and a parking lot full of potholes deep enough to swallow a tire. Past the corner store where Dom let Eddie play guitar on Friday nights, the regulars dropping singles and fives into his open guitar case while they waited for their subs.

"The security's good," Vinnie said after a while. "Her dad's got money. He'll handle it."

"Yeah."

But Eddie didn't believe it. Money didn't stop guys like Jake. Money just meant Jake had to get more creative. More patient. The thought of Jake sitting somewhere right now, planning his next move with that cold snake-like patience, made Eddie's stomach roll over.

"You working tonight?" Vinnie asked.

"Nah. Told Dom I needed off. Figured I'd hit the Red Line for a couple hours, make some cash before..." He trailed off.

"Before you go to the bowling alley."

"Yeah."

Vinnie's knuckles went white on the steering wheel. "That's a bad idea."

"Probably."

"Eddie, listen to me. Jake's family owns that place. You walk in there, you're walking into his house. His territory. He can do whatever he wants, and nobody's gonna stop him."

"So let him try."

The car filled with silence. Eddie could feel Vinnie thinking, running through scenarios, seeing all the ways this could go horribly wrong.

"You want me there?" Vinnie finally asked.

"Nah. You got the warehouse."

"I can call out."

Eddie looked at his brother. Eighteen years old and already carrying weight that would've broken most people, working full-time at the warehouse, keeping Ma from falling apart completely, making sure Eddie ate something besides pizza and Pepsi, keeping Pop from drinking himself into oblivion or worse.

"I got it," Eddie said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

Vinnie was quiet for another minute. Then, "You know what Pop would say, right? Famiglia first. But he don't mean it the way he says it. He means don't make waves. Keep your head down. Let other people's problems stay other people's problems. Don't get involved with nothing that might bring trouble to the door."

"This ain't Pop's problem. It's mine."

"You love this girl?"

The question caught Eddie off guard. He opened his mouth, closed it. Thought about Evie's laugh before Jake happened. The way she'd looked at Eddie like he was interesting instead of invisible. The way she'd listened when he played guitar, actually listened, not just waiting for him to stop so she could talk about herself.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Maybe. Yeah. I think so."

"Then you be smart about it. You don't go there looking for a fight. You go there, you stay visible, you let Jake see you so he knows he can't pull nothing. That's it. You understand me?"

"Yeah."

"I'm serious, Eddie. You start something with this guy, it don't end at the bowling alley. It follows you home. Follows Evie home. Follows Ma to Stop & Shop. These rich kids, they got lawyers and dads who know people. We got nothing. So you be smart."

Eddie hadn't thought about that. Hadn't thought past tonight, past the bowling alley, past the chance to look Jake in the face and let him know Evie wasn't alone.

"I'll be smart," he said.

"You better be."

They pulled up to their building, three stories of brick that had probably been nice back in the '50s but now just looked tired. Peeling paint around the windows. Concrete steps with cracks spreading like varicose veins. Mrs. Kowalski's cat, asleep on the second-floor landing, fat and orange and utterly unconcerned with the world's problems.

Eddie grabbed his guitar case from the trunk.

"You gonna tell Ma where you're going?" Vinnie asked through the window.

"She won't notice."

"She might."

"She won't."

Vinnie's face did something complicated. Not angry. Sadder than angry. "Just page me when you get to the Red Line. And when you leave. And when you get to the bowling alley. So I know you're breathing."

"I will."

"And Eddie?"

"You get a bad feeling, any bad feeling at all, you leave. You don't wait around to see if you're right. You just leave. Capisce?"

"Capisco."

Vinnie nodded, put the car in gear. The Civic pulled away, tail lights disappearing around the corner toward the warehouse where Vinnie would spend the next eight hours loading trucks and pretending he didn't have dreams bigger than South Boston.

Eddie stood there for a minute, guitar case in one hand, pager vibrating against his hip with some message he'd check later. The October cold was biting now. He needed to go inside and grab a

jacket. Maybe the leather one Vinnie had handed down last year, the one with the busted zipper. Instead, he sat down on the front steps and pulled out his guitar.

The melody came easier this time. Dark. Minor key. Something that felt like watching someone drown in slow motion and not being able to reach them in time. He played it through once, then again, letting the notes hang in the cold air.

Above him, Mrs. Kowalski's window was open a crack. He could see her shadow behind the curtain, watching. She didn't wave. Didn't call down. Just watched the way she watched everything in this building, patient and knowing and slightly sad, like she'd seen this story before and knew how it ended.

Eddie played the melody a third time, adding variations, trying to find the progression that would make it complete. But something was missing, a missing chord he couldn't find.

He put the guitar away.

Inside, the apartment smelled like garlic and red wine and something burning. Ma was in the kitchen, stirring a pot on the stove, sauce probably, though she'd let it cook so long it had gone thick and dark, more like paste than anything meant to go on pasta.

The TV was on in the living room. Wheel of Fortune. Some woman from Michigan was spinning the wheel, calling out consonants, trying to solve a puzzle Eddie could see from here, but she apparently couldn't.

And there on the wall, right next to the TV, hung the crucifix. Brass Jesus, arms spread, head tilted in eternal agony. Nonno had brought it from the old country, back when people still believed suffering was worth something.

Eddie stared at it for a second. Wondered if God was watching him the way Mrs. Kowalski watched from her window. Patient. Knowing. Slightly sad. Already knowing how this story ended.

"Where's Vinnie?" Ma asked without turning around.

"Work."

"You eat?"

"Not hungry."

She nodded. Kept stirring. The sauce made wet bubbling sounds, thick and slow.

Eddie started toward his room.

"Eddie?"

He stopped. "Yeah, Ma?"

She turned around. For just a second, one brief flash, he saw the woman she used to be. Before Pop. Before the wine became part of dinner, and then became dinner. Before whatever light had been inside her got slowly, steadily snuffed out until only this tired woman remained.

"You be careful tonight," she said.

He hadn't told her where he was going. Hadn't told her anything.

"How'd you..."

"I'm your mother. I know things." She turned back to the stove. "Just be careful. And maybe say a prayer to Saint Anthony. For protection."

"Since when do you believe in that stuff?"

"Since always. I just stopped talking about it."

Eddie didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. Just went to his room, closed the door, and sat on the edge of his bed.

Six-fifteen. He had time. Enough to hit the Red Line for an hour, maybe ninety minutes if the commuters were generous. Make forty, fifty bucks if he was lucky. Enough for...what? He didn't know. Gas money for Vinnie. Something other than pizza for dinner tomorrow. A new set of guitar strings.

He changed into the leather jacket and checked his pockets. Guitar pick. Pager. Flip phone. Twenty-three dollars in crumpled bills. Not enough, but it was a start.

The Pignose amp sat in the corner of his room, small and battered and covered in stickers from bands nobody remembered anymore. Battery-powered. Portable. Loud enough to cut through the subway noise but not so loud that the transit cops would shut him down.

He grabbed it, grabbed the Strat, and headed for the door.

Ma was still in the kitchen. The TV still played in the living room. The crucifix still hung on the wall, Christ still suffering, still silent.

Eddie didn't say goodbye.

The Red Line platform at Downtown Crossing smelled of urine, brake dust, and the particular kind of desperation that came from spending your whole life underground. Eddie found his usual spot, near the fare gates but not too close, where the acoustics were decent, and the commuters had to walk past him to catch their trains.

He set up quickly, Pignose amp on the ground, volume at seven, guitar tuned and ready. The case, open at his feet, with a few singles already in there to prime the pump, making it look like other people had already decided he was worth their money.

Six-thirty. Rush hour. The platform was filling up with the usual crowd, people in cheap suits and Dunkin' Donuts uniforms and denim jackets still dusty from whatever construction site they'd spent the day bleeding on. Tired faces. Dead eyes. The look of people who'd stopped expecting anything good to happen a long time ago.

Eddie started with something soft. Just chords, no real melody yet. Feeling out the crowd. Seeing who looked up, who kept walking.

An old man stopped. Late sixties, maybe seventy. Thick Italian accent when he spoke. "You know 'O Sole Mio'?"

Eddie smiled. "Yeah. I know it."

He launched into it, fingers finding the familiar progression, the melody that every Italian in Boston knew by heart. The old man's face did something complicated. His eyes went somewhere else, somewhere that probably didn't exist anymore except in his memory.

When Eddie finished, the old man pulled out his wallet and dropped a five in the case.

"Bravo," he said, his voice rough. "You play good, like my brother used to play before the war."

"Thank you."

The old man nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something else but didn't. He just turned and walked toward the inbound platform, shoulders hunched against a weight Eddie couldn't see but could feel radiating off him like heat.

More people stopped. An old woman with a shopping bag full of groceries. A guy in his fifties with paint on his jeans. A younger couple, maybe in their thirties, holding hands like they were afraid to let go.

Eddie played "Volare." Played it slow, turned the upbeat melody into something sadder, something that ached. The old woman started crying. Just stood there with her shopping bag and let the tears run down her face while Eddie played.

When he finished, she crossed herself. Dropped two dollars in the case. Whispered something in Italian, Eddie didn't catch.

A train pulled in. Red Line inbound. People rushed for the doors. The platform cleared.

Eddie was alone again.

He checked his watch. Six-fifty. Ten minutes until the next wave.

His pager buzzed. Evie's number. Then a message: 143.

I love you.

Eddie stared at the tiny screen. Something twisted in his chest. Something that felt like drowning.

He picked up the guitar again.

This time, he played for the Irish crowd, the ones who'd be coming through any minute now. Played the opening to "Danny Boy." Slow. Mournful. Let each note hang in the air like a question nobody wanted to answer.

They came, the Irish guys in their work clothes and steel-toed boots. The women with rosaries in their purses and pictures of JFK still hanging in their kitchens. The old ones who remembered when Southie was all Irish, before the yuppies and the condos and the coffee shops that charged four dollars for something that used to cost fifty cents.

An old man stopped. Had to be eighty. Thin as parchment. Eyes that had seen things Eddie couldn't imagine.

Eddie played. Let the melody speak for itself.

The old man stood there through the whole song. Didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stood there with tears running down his face, silent as stone.

When Eddie finished, the old man pulled out a twenty and dropped it in the case.

"My son," he said. Voice barely a whisper. "That was his favorite. Before..." He didn't finish. Eddie understood. Before the accident. Before the cancer. Before whatever darkness had come and taken something that couldn't be replaced.

"I'm sorry," Eddie said.

The old man nodded. "You play beautiful. Don't stop. The world needs it."

Then he was gone. Disappeared into the crowd as if he'd never been there at all.

Eddie looked down at the case. Had to be sixty dollars in there now. Maybe more. Best night he'd had in weeks.

His pager buzzed again, Vinnie's number. No code. Just the number.

Eddie picked up his phone and dialed.

"Yeah?"

"Where you at?" Vinnie asked.

"Downtown Crossing. Red Line."

"How much you make?"

"Maybe sixty."

"Good. That's good." Vinnie was quiet for a second. "You still going to the bowling alley?"

"Yeah."

"What time?"

"Eight. Maybe a little after."

"You want me to meet you there?"

Eddie thought about it. Thought about Jake's face when he realized Eddie wasn't afraid. Wasn't hiding.

"Nah," he said. "I got it."

Vinnie sighed. "Page me when you get there. And when you leave. I'm serious."

"I will."

"And if anything feels strange..."

"I'll leave. I know."

The line went dead.

Eddie flipped the phone shut. Looked at his watch. Seven-twenty. Forty minutes until he needed to leave. Time for a few more songs. A few more dollars. A few more old people crying over memories that hurt too much to hold but hurt worse to let go.

He played "Volare" again. Played it the way it was meant to be played this time, upbeat and hopeful, the way it sounded when people still believed in things like happiness and second chances and tomorrow being better than today.

Nobody cried this time. A few people smiled. A couple actually sang along, their voices rough and unpracticed but sincere in the way that mattered.

More money in the case. Singles and fives. One ten from a woman who looked like somebody's grandmother, the kind who made sauce on Sundays and knew everybody's business and would feed you until you couldn't move if you so much as looked hungry.

Seven-forty-five.

Eddie packed up. Counted the money. Seventy-three dollars. Not bad for an hour's work.

He put the Pignose back in its bag, the Strat back in its case. Headed for the exit.

Eddie walked. Down Washington Street. Past the Common. Toward Quincy, where Jake's father's bowling alley was. His pager buzzed. Evie again.

Please don't go.

Eddie kept walking.

Past the theater district. Past Chinatown. Past the parts of Boston tourists never saw, the parts where things happened in shadows and nobody asked questions because they already knew the answers and didn't like them.

His phone rang. Evie.

He answered.

"Eddie, please." Her voice was shaking. "Please don't go there. He'll hurt you. That's what he does, that's all he does."

"I'll be fine."

"You won't. Nobody's fine around him." She was crying now. Full crying. "There's something wrong with him. Something broken. When he looks at you, it's like he can see things. Things nobody should be able to see."

Eddie felt that cold thing slide down his spine again. The same feeling from the parking lot. The same sense that something was watching, waiting.

"I have to go," he said. "I can't just let him win."

"He already won." Her voice went hollow. Empty. "He won the second I got scared. The second I stopped being able to sleep because I was afraid to wake up and see his face staring through the window."

Eddie didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know how to argue with something that felt true in a way that went deeper than logic.

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

"Don't be sorry. Just don't go."

"I have to."

Silence on the other end. Just her breathing. Fast. Shallow.

"Then be careful," she whispered. "And Eddie?"

"Yeah?"

"I do love you. I know it's only been two months, and that's stupid, and we're too young, but I do. I really do."

"I love you too."

The line went dead.

Eddie stood there on the corner of Washington and Essex, holding his phone, feeling like something important had just slipped through his fingers and he'd never get it back.

He should turn around. Go home. Let Evie's dad handle it. Let the private security handle it. Let Jake get bored and move on to the next girl, the next victim, the next person whose life he could hollow out for sport.

But he kept walking.

Past the bus station, past the part of Boston where the streets had numbers instead of names, and nobody spoke English unless they had to.

The bowling alley looked like a beacon. Bright lights. Big sign. THE FAMILY BOWL. Jake's father's name underneath in smaller letters. PROPRIETOR: JOHN MORRISON.

Eddie stopped across the street. Just stood there, guitar case in one hand, Pignose bag in the other, and stared at the building like it might tell him something he needed to know.

Cars in the parking lot. Families going in. Families coming out. Normal people doing normal things. Bowling. Eating nachos. Drinking beer. Pretending the world was a safe place where bad things only happened to other people.

And there, leaning against a black BMW, arms crossed, face barely visible in the street lights, was Jake.

Waiting.

Like he'd known Eddie would come. Like he'd been standing there for hours, patient as stone, just waiting for Eddie to walk into the trap.

Eddie felt that weight settle over him again. That sense of being watched by something older than Jake. Something that had been waiting long before tonight. Long before Evie, before any of this started.

Jake saw him. Their eyes met across the parking lot.

Jake smiled.

Not a normal smile. A smirk. Something slower. Something that knew how this ended.

Eddie took a breath. Felt the October cold fill his lungs: tasted metal and exhaust and something else he couldn't name.

Then he started walking toward the bowling alley.

Toward Jake.

Toward whatever came next.

Chapter 2

Jake Morrison's father had never been wealthy until he took a big loan from someone he knew from back in school, Howard Winter of the Winter Hill gang. The loan came with conditions. Mr. Morrison had to allow Winter Hill members to sell cocaine from the back of the Family Bowl. Morrison agreed. He also accepted the perks that came with it: full-time protection from other gangs and a hitman on call if he ever had trouble with enemies.

Mr. Morrison knew his son, Jake, was going to confront someone from school over a girl. He also knew that his son was a coward at heart. That's why he had Tommy Meeks standing behind Jake on the other side of the BMW, watching.

Eddie began the long walk across the parking lot. He'd have to pass Jake and the mobster to reach the door of the bowling alley. The first thing he thought about was whether he should put down the guitar and amp so he could defend himself. But he decided to hold on to them and keep going.

The second thing he thought about was what Vinny always said: *Keep scanning. Don't stare at one thing so you don't get surprised.*

Then everything changed.

Each step he took became one month from the past year of his life. Time slowed. Everything turned to black.

He was back twelve months ago at Sammy's boxing gym on a street near Carson Beach. The air smelled like old leather and sweat. He could hear the rhythmic thud of gloves hitting heavy bags. The huge poster of Rocky Marciano loomed on the wall next to the pro-sized ring—Rocky mid-punch, eyes focused, everything committed to that one moment.

Sammy Giancaso was an old-school boxing coach in his seventies who'd decided not to go for the easy MMA money. He wanted to keep the 'sweet science' of boxing alive in South Boston. Sammy had been a cut man for Rocky Marciano himself. He'd seen something in Eddie that most didn't see, not just talent, but discipline. The kid actually listened.

Sammy told all the guys who wanted to go pro that he wouldn't work with them unless they could do twenty minutes straight of shadowboxing and twenty minutes non-stop with the jump rope. Most couldn't. Eddie showed Sammy right away that he could. Sam started working with him on the pads, teaching him the secret knockout punches that Rocky used. Rocky himself came into the gym a few times in those old days to see young kids and help out with charity work. Sam still told stories about it.

"You got fast hands, kid," Sam had said, holding the pads. "But you telegraph. You think too much. When you see the opening, you commit. No thinking. Just faith."

Eddie remembered nodding, throwing the combination again. One-two. Hook. Uppercut.

"That's it. Like you mean it."

Then the scene faded, and Eddie took another step.

Eleven months ago. The Cantab Lounge in Cambridge. The stage lights were hot on his face. His fingers moved across the Stratocaster's neck, bending strings on Muddy's song "Mannish Boy," making the notes cry and growl like they had something to prove. The blackface Fender Super Reverb that Vinny had helped him lug over was cranked just right, not too clean, not too distorted. Pure tone.

Eddie had only been singing for a few months. His voice was rough, not polished, but it didn't matter because his guitar playing was next level. He sounded like Albert King meets Freddie King meets B.B. King, all with his own style and phrasing that no one had heard before.

But all Eddie cared about was the man at the bar.

Little Joe Cook sat there, watching. He was a one-hit wonder in the 50s with his song "Peanuts." He just sat, watching with those big, swollen eyes that had seen a thousand guitarists try and fail. Joe didn't smile easily, but he was watching, and he hadn't looked away once. That was approval. That was everything.

Eddie hit the outro: Well, well, well, well... Hurry, hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Don't hurt me, don't hurt me, well, well, well, well.

His fingers ached from bending the strings two whole steps, the way he'd learned from old Albert King records. His voice cracked on the last line. He didn't care.

Then the scene faded as he took another step.

Nine months ago. The apartment. The smell of cheap wine and something burning on the stove. His father's fist came out of nowhere, a wild haymaker fueled by alcohol and rage. It caught Eddie square. Blood filled his mouth, salty and warm.

Eddie ducked the second punch. His father's momentum carried him forward. He fell, catching the corner of the TV with his forehead. The sound was sickening, a wet crack. His father dropped to the floor, knocked out cold, blood pouring from a gash above his eye.

Eddie's hands shook as he grabbed his phone. Not 911. He couldn't call 911. He called Sammy.

"Press a wet towel to the cut," Sam said, calm as always. "Keep pressure on it. I'm coming."

Sam arrived in ten minutes with his old cut bag, the same one he'd used for the Rocky fights. He worked fast, holding gauze, applying pressure, stopping the bleeding with the efficiency of a man who'd seen worse in real rings. They got Eddie's father into bed.

Sam didn't ask questions. He just squeezed Eddie's shoulder once before leaving.

Then the scene faded. Another step toward Jake.

Three weeks ago. The park. Evie sat beside him on the bench, watching kids run around the playground. The afternoon sun made her hair glow. She turned to him with something he'd never seen in a girlfriend before: real interest. Not in what he could do for her. In who he actually was.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked.

Eddie nodded. "Yeah. I'm Catholic. But I haven't been taking the sacraments or going to Mass."

"I've been going to Mass with my dad," she said quietly. "But I don't understand it."

"My grandmother taught me more in one hour than all my CCD classes combined," Eddie said.

Evie looked at him seriously. "I think life is useless and unbearable if God doesn't exist."

Eddie felt something shift inside him. She got it. She understood the weight.

"I've been reading this old book I got from my grandmother. It's from St. Gertrude, The Herald of Divine Love," he said. "It's about confidence and trust in prayer. Besides following God's will in everything, confidence in prayer is what makes Jesus happy. That's what He told St. Gertrude during His apparitions to her."

Evie's eyes widened slightly. "Confidence?"

"Yeah. Like... trusting Him completely. Not being afraid."

Then the scene faded.

Eddie knew he was getting closer to Jake, but still couldn't see him through the blackness.

Then a fist exploded into his face.

A real sucker punch. Eddie never saw it coming.

Everything went white.

White became red. Red became pain.

Eddie was on his knees, still holding his amp and guitar case. Blood dripped from his nose, forming dark circles on the asphalt.

Get up.

The voice wasn't his own. It was Sam's from all those hours in the gym.

Eddie's vision cleared slowly. Jake stood over him, chest heaving, fists still clenched. Behind Jake, leaning against the BMW like he had front-row seats to a prizefight, stood Tommy Meeks. The mobster's expression was pure anticipation. He wasn't here to stop anything. He was here to watch the show.

This is the guy who terrorized Evie. Who made her afraid to walk to class? Who grabbed her in the hallway and laughed when she pulled away.

Eddie pushed himself up, first to one knee. Then standing.

Time stretched.

His hands moved with deliberate care as he set the guitar case down. Then the amp. Everything precious, everything breakable—he placed them gently beside the BMW's front tire.

"What are you doing?" Jake's voice cracked. "You think you can—"

Eddie straightened into his stance.

Flashback—The Gym, Three Months Ago

"Most people don't know this," Sammy said, wrapping Eddie's hands. "But I was at ringside for Marciano's fight against Walcott. September '52. Everyone remembers the knockout, but nobody talks about what happened before it."

Eddie flexed his wrapped hands. "What happened?"

Sammy's eyes went distant. "Rocky took punishment. Serious punishment. Walcott was picking him apart. The ref almost stopped it in the first round. But Rocky never changed his stance. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because the stance isn't just about defending. It's about hiding what's coming." Sam demonstrated, left arm extended straight, body bent at the waist, right hand cocked tight against the ribs. "See this? Your opponent can't see your power hand. They don't know when it's coming. And when it comes—"

Sam's right fist rose in slow motion, an uppercut from the floor.

"—it comes from God Himself."

Present—The Parking Lot

Eddie's left arm extended. Straight. Unwavering.

His body bent at the waist, coiled like a spring.

His right hand disappeared against his ribs, cocked and hidden.

Jake's face changed. The swagger drained out of him like water from a broken glass. He'd seen this stance before, on grainy black-and-white film reels, in boxing documentaries his father made him watch to toughen him up.

Evie's voice in the park, just yesterday: "Sometimes I think God puts us exactly where we need to be. Even when it's scary."

Was this where he needed to be? Was this justice or vengeance?

The answer came swift and certain: Jake had hurt people. He'd hurt Evie. And he'd do it again tomorrow unless someone stopped him.

This was justice.

"Tommy—" Jake's voice pitched higher.

Tommy Meeks grinned and crossed his arms. "I didn't come here to fight, kid. I came here to watch."

Flashback—The Gym

"The secret," Sam said, "is that the whole body becomes the punch. Not just your arm. Your feet, your legs, your hips, your back, everything rises up together. Like a prayer."

Eddie frowned. "Like a prayer?"

"Yeah." Sam's voice softened. "You ever see someone pray? I mean, really pray? Their whole body's in it. Same thing. You plant your feet, you trust the technique, and you let everything else go. The punch finds its way."

Eddie tried it. Feet planted. Body coiled. Right hand rising from his ribs—

"No." Sam stopped him. "You're thinking too much. Don't aim. Don't calculate. Just trust. Plant your feet and let it go."

Present—The Parking Lot

Eddie moved forward.

One step. Two.

Evie smiling at him in the hallway. Evie flinching when Jake walked past. Evie whispering, "I'm afraid of him, Eddie."

Not anymore. After tonight, she wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

Jake tried to swing. His fist came in wild and desperate, but it couldn't get past Eddie's extended left arm. The arm controlled everything—distance, vision, timing. It was a wall Jake couldn't breach.

Eddie felt his feet against the asphalt. Solid. Rooted.

Trust the technique. Trust the Marciano legacy.

Time slowed to nothing.

Flashback—The Gym, Final Session

"Marciano's uppercut wasn't just a punch," Sam said quietly. "It was deliverance. You understand? When you're getting beat down, when the world's trying to keep you on the canvas, when everyone thinks you're finished, that's when the uppercut comes. Not from anger. From something deeper."

"From what?"

Sam met his eyes. "From knowing you're not alone in the ring."

Present—The Parking Lot

Eddie planted his feet.

This is for Evie. For every kid Jake ever pushed around. For everyone too afraid to fight back.

This is justice.

The prayer began in his toes. It rose through his calves, his thighs, his hips twisting, his back uncoiling, his shoulder driving upward, and finally—

The right hand emerged from hiding.

It came from the ground itself, carrying all of Eddie's weight, all of Sam's training, all the months of grief and rage and desperate hope. It carried Evie's fear and his need to protect her. It carried the righteous fury of the powerless, finally empowered.

The uppercut caught Jake square beneath the jaw.

The sound was clean. Percussive. Final.

Jake's head snapped back. His eyes rolled white. His body went rigid, suspended for one impossible moment in the air, then collapsed like a building whose foundation had been ripped away.

He hit the pavement with a wet, heavy sound.

Then came the tinkling.

Delicate. Musical. Like wind chimes made of bone.

Small white objects landing, scattered across the asphalt around Jake's head. They bounced and skittered, catching the parking lot lights.

Eddie stared.

Teeth.

Not broken. Sheared. Clean at the gum line.

Five of them. Maybe six. Rolling to a stop in the spreading pool of blood.

Flashback—Sam's voice, almost reverent:

"They said Rocky hit so hard he didn't just knock teeth out. He sheared them off. Clean. Like a guillotine. The dentists had never seen anything like it."

Present

Eddie's breath caught in his throat.

Jake's mouth was a ruin. His jaw hung crooked, and where his front teeth should have been was just dark, bleeding emptiness. He tried to speak through a gurgling sound. Eddie saw that the tip of his tongue was missing.

Just like Rocky used to do.

The thought should have horrified him. Instead, it settled over him like confirmation. Like a seal of authenticity on everything Sam had taught him.

This was real. This was what the uppercut did when it was thrown right.

When it was thrown with everything you had.

Blood pooled immediately from Jake's nose, his mouth. His jaw sat at a crooked angle. Eddie stood over him, right hand still extended, breathing hard.

Evie is safe now, at least from him.

Tommy Meeks let out a low whistle. He looked down at Jake's unconscious body, then back at Eddie. The mobster's smile was genuine now, not mocking, but appreciative.

Professional.

"Nice punch, kid." He tilted his head toward the street. His voice dropped. "Real nice. But his old man's gonna want blood for this. You better hit the road. Fast."

Eddie's hands were already moving. He grabbed the guitar case. The amp.

He didn't look back at Jake's broken body.

He didn't look back at Tommy Meeks, still leaning against the BMW, still smiling.

He just walked.

One foot in front of the other.

Away from the bowling alley. Away from the blood on the pavement. Away from whatever consequences were coming.

Evie's voice again: "Sometimes I think God puts us exactly where we need to be."

Yeah. Maybe He does.

Thank you, he said silently. To Sam. To God. To whoever was listening.

Thank you for not leaving me alone in the ring.

Thank you for making me strong enough to protect her.

Chapter 3

Eddie walked into homeroom with his guitar case in one hand and the amp in the other. His knuckles were swollen purple. The split in his lip had scabbed over during the night...

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, that familiar high-pitched hum that had been the soundtrack to every morning for four years. The smell of old textbooks and floor wax. The scrape of chair legs against linoleum. Normal. Everything looked normal.

Except that Evie's desk was empty.

Eddie stopped in the doorway. His eyes went to her desk: third row, second seat from the window. The desk was empty. Her backpack wasn't hanging from the chair. Her notebook wasn't open. The space where she sat every morning was just... vacant.

Mrs. Patterson sat at her desk at the front of the room. Her head was down. Her shoulders shook slightly. She was crying.

The other students sat in their seats, quiet. Too quiet. Nobody was talking. Nobody was passing notes, checking phones, or doing any of the usual pre-bell chaos. They just sat there, waiting, with expressions Eddie couldn't read.

Eddie set down his guitar and amp next to his desk. The sound seemed too loud in the silence. A few students glanced at him, then looked away quickly.

He sat down slowly; his eyes still fixed on Evie's empty desk.

The loudspeaker on the front wall crackled to life with a burst of static.

Principal Hendricks' voice came through, formal, careful, measured in that way adults speak when they're trying not to break down.

"Good morning, students and faculty. Due to a tragic incident that occurred last night involving one of our students, Evie Callahan, we will be dismissing early today. Your homeroom teachers will provide more information. The nurse's office will remain open all day for anyone who needs support or counseling. Buses will run at ten a.m. Thank you."

The speaker clicked off.

Eddie stopped breathing.

Tragic incident.

Evie Callahan.

Last night.

The room seemed to slowly rotate. The fluorescent lights grew too bright, searing into his eyes. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears, loud and fast. His hands gripped the edge of his desk so hard his knuckles turned white. The same knuckles that had shattered Jake Morrison's jaw. The same hands that had held Evie's hand in the park.

Mrs. Patterson lifted her head. Her eyes were red and swollen. Mascara wet and beginning to run. She looked at the class, twenty-eight faces staring back at her, waiting for an explanation.

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"Evie Callahan..." Mrs. Patterson's voice cracked. She cleared her throat, tried again. "Evie took her own life last night. Her parents found her this morning. I'm... I'm so sorry."

Someone gasped. A girl in the front row started crying immediately, loud, gulping sobs.

Eddie didn't move. Didn't blink. Didn't breathe.

Took her own life.

The words didn't make sense. They were just sounds, syllables arranged in an order that his brain couldn't process.

Evie's voice echoed in his memory, clear as if she were sitting beside him: *I think life is useless and unbearable if God doesn't exist.*

She'd said that in the park. Six months ago. Sitting on the bench watching kids play. She'd looked at him with those serious eyes and said it like it was the most important truth in the world.

If God doesn't exist.

Eddie had told her about St. Gertrude. About confidence. About trust. He'd told her that confidence in prayer was what made Jesus happy.

And now she was dead.

Mrs. Patterson was still talking, something about grief counselors, something about supporting each other, and that it was okay to feel whatever you were feeling, but Eddie couldn't hear her anymore. The sound had become muffled and distant.

He stared at Evie's empty desk.

The desk where she'd sat yesterday. The desk where she'd turned around last week to borrow a pencil from him and smiled that small, shy smile that made everything else disappear for just a second.

The desk that would stay empty now. Forever.

Eddie's hands started shaking. Not a little. Violently. As if something inside him were trying to break out through his skin. His breathing came in short, shallow gasps. The room spun the same way it had when he took a solid punch in Sammy's gym. He gripped the desk tighter, but it didn't help. Nothing helped.

Sarah Kelly, a girl in the next seat over, reached out and touched his shoulder. "Eddie? Are you okay?"

He couldn't answer. His throat had closed. No words would come.

"He knew her," someone whispered from behind him. "They were close."

"Oh my God," another voice said. "Eddie, I'm so sorry."

More hands on his shoulders now. Voices saying things. But Eddie couldn't focus on any of it. All he could see was Evie's empty desk, and all he could hear was her voice in the park, saying that life is useless and unbearable if God doesn't exist; all he could feel was his own heart breaking into pieces.

Mrs. Patterson stood up and walked over to him. She knelt beside his desk, her face level with his.

"Eddie," she said softly. "Do you need to go to the nurse's office?"

He shook his head. Or tried to. He wasn't sure if he actually moved.

"Do you want to call someone? Your parents?"

My father? The thought was absurd. Laughable. His father didn't even know who Evie was.

"Why?" Eddie's voice came out as a whisper, hoarse, broken. "Why did she do it?"

Mrs. Patterson's eyes filled with fresh tears. "I don't know, Eddie. I don't know."

But Eddie knew what Evie would say. He could hear her voice as clearly as if she were sitting in that empty desk right now:

Because life is useless and unbearable if God doesn't exist.

And maybe she'd stopped believing God existed.

Or maybe she'd stopped believing God cared. Eddie stood up so fast his chair fell backward and crashed to the floor. The sound made everyone jump. He grabbed his guitar case and amp and walked toward the door. Not running. Just walking. One foot in front of the other. Mechanical. Automatic.

"Eddie, wait—" Mrs. Patterson called after him.

He didn't wait.

He walked out of the classroom, down the empty hallway, past the main office where secretaries were answering phones with tight voices, past the trophy case with its dusty football helmets and faded photographs of teams from decades ago.

He pushed through the front doors of the school and stepped outside.

The sun was shining. Birds were singing. The sky was blue.

Evie was dead.

Vinny waited at the far end of the parking lot, leaning against his car. He didn't ask questions when Eddie appeared with his gear. He just straightened up and opened the trunk.

"Where to?" Vinny asked.

"Home."

They didn't speak the rest of the way.

Eddie stared out the passenger window as South Boston rolled past. The late morning sun was too bright, cutting hard shadows across empty sidewalks. A trash truck rumbled down a side street, its hydraulic brakes hissing. Two old women stood outside McGrath's Market, smoking cigarettes and talking with their hands. A kid on a bike rode past with a basketball under one arm.

Ordinary. Everything was ordinary.

The word kept echoing in his head with each heartbeat. Dead. Dead. Dead.

Evie was dead.

The vinyl seat stuck to Eddie's legs through his jeans. The car smelled like old coffee and Vinny's cologne, something cheap his uncle bought in bulk. The radio was off. Just the sound of the engine and the tires on pavement and Eddie's own breathing.

When they turned onto their street, Vinny slowed the car.

A Boston Police cruiser sat in front of the house, white with blue stripes, its roof lights dark. Behind it, a black sedan with tinted windows that reflected the sun like a mirror. Official. Federal, maybe. Or detectives.

Eddie's stomach dropped.

"Should we keep going?" Vinny asked quietly.

Eddie's hands were still shaking. He clenched them into fists, felt the pain shoot through his swollen knuckles. "No, I need to face this."

Vinny pulled to the curb across the street and killed the engine. They sat there for a moment. Eddie could see movement through the front window of his house, figures inside, shadows crossing back and forth behind the curtains.

He opened the door and got out. His legs felt like he was back at the gym, wearing ankle weights.

His mother opened the door before he could reach for the handle. Her face was wrecked, eyes swollen nearly shut, cheeks blotchy and red, mascara smeared in dark streaks that ran partway down her cheeks. She'd been crying for hours, maybe. Since she'd heard, her hair was unwashed, pulled back in a loose ponytail. She wore the same bathrobe she'd had on this morning, tied tight at the waist.

"Eddie," she whispered. "Oh, Eddie. Oh my God."

She pulled him into a hug so tight he could barely breathe. He could smell everything. Her vanilla body spray, the Newports she chain-smoked when she was stressed, the Irish breakfast tea she drank by the gallon, the Dove soap she used. All of it mixed together in one overwhelming wave. Her whole body trembled against his like she was standing in a cold wind.

"Mom," he said quietly. "I'm okay."

She pulled back just enough to look at his face. Her eyes searched his, looking for what, he didn't know. Answers, maybe. Or just her son, still alive, still here.

Behind her, at the kitchen table, sat a uniformed Boston cop and two men in suits. The cop was young, maybe thirty, with close-cropped hair and the kind of face that looked like it had never smiled. He stood by the counter, arms folded, watching everything.

The two detectives sat at the table. One was older, late fifties, with silver hair that was thinning on top. He had kind eyes, tired eyes, eyes that had seen too much death. His suit was rumpled, as if he'd slept in it. A wedding ring on his left hand, worn thin over the years.

The other detective was younger, maybe forty, Italian, clean-shaven with sharp features and a crisp navy suit. He held a pen over a small notebook, ready to write.

A pot of coffee sat on the counter, still steaming. Three mugs. An ashtray overflowing with Eddie's mother's cigarette butts, the filters stained with her lipstick. The kitchen window was open slightly, letting in the sound of cars passing on the street outside.

The older detective stood up slowly, like his knees hurt. He had the movements of someone who'd been doing this job too long.

"Eddie Marcello?" His voice was softer than Eddie expected. Gentle, almost.

Eddie nodded, slowly extracting himself from his mother's grip.

The detective extended his hand. "I'm Detective Kelley. This is Detective Rossi." They shook hands. Kelley's grip was firm but not aggressive. "I'm very sorry for your loss, son. I know Eva meant a lot to you."

Eddie's throat tightened. He couldn't speak.

Kelley gestured to a chair. "Please, sit down. I know this is the worst day of your life. We'll make this as quick as we can."

Eddie's mother led him to the table. Her hand stayed on his shoulder. Vinny followed, standing near the doorway with his arms crossed. Not sitting. Just watching. Being present.

Eddie sat. His legs felt weak. The kitchen chair creaked under his weight.

Detective Kelley sat down across from him and leaned forward slightly, elbows on the table. His eyes were warm. Sad, even. "We've already spoken to Eva's parents this morning," he said, shaking his head. "Nobody should have to go through what they're going through."

He shook his head. "We've also spoken to a boy named Jake Morrison. We know about the fight at the Family Bowl."

Eddie felt dizzy hearing the name spoken out loud in his mother's kitchen.

Eva Callahan.

Not Evie. Eva. Official. Clinical. A case file now. A death investigation. A name typed into police reports and spoken by strangers who'd never heard her laugh or seen her read Flannery O'Connor in the park or listened to her talk about God.

His vision swam. Colors bled together. He gripped the edge of the table with both hands.

The table was sticky under his palms; his mother never cleaned it properly. He could feel the grain of the wood through the thin layer of whatever she'd spilled this morning. Coffee, probably. The overhead light buzzed faintly. Someone's phone vibrated in the living room. A dog barked outside, three sharp barks, then silence.

Eddie focused on these details because if he didn't, he'd fall apart.

"Eddie," Kelley said gently, "I need you to tell me about the fight. Just in your own words. Take your time."

Eddie swallowed hard. His mouth was dry as sand. "I was walking into the Family Bowl last night. I had my guitar and amp. Morrison came out of nowhere and sucker-punched me. I didn't see it coming."

"Where did he hit you?"

Eddie touched his split lip. "Here, knocked me down."

Kelley nodded, his face sympathetic. "Then what happened?"

"I got up. I hit him back."

"How many times?"

"Just once."

The two detectives looked at each other. Something passed between them, surprise, maybe. Or disbelief.

Rossi leaned forward, pen poised. "Once? You're sure?"

"Yes. Once."

Detective Kelley let out a slow breath. He rubbed his face with one hand, then looked at Eddie with something that might have been respect. Or maybe pity.

"Eddie, we've just come from Mass General Hospital. Jake Morrison's in bad shape. His jaw is broken in three places. They had to wire it shut. He lost eleven teeth, some completely, some broken off at the root. They're doing reconstructive surgery on his face. There's damage to his orbital bone." He paused. "I'm not here to charge you with anything. From what I understand, Morrison started it. You defended yourself. That's pretty clear."

"Like I said," Eddie repeated quietly, "I hit him once. An uppercut."

Kelley nodded. "I believe you." He glanced at Rossi, then back at Eddie. "The only thing we could get out of Morrison before they sedated him for surgery was that he went to Eva's house last night around nine p.m., and then to the bowling alley. That's the last thing he said that made any sense."

Eddie's head snapped up. His heart lurched in his chest. "He went to her house?"

"Yes. Last night."

"What did he do?"

Kelley's expression darkened. "That's what we're trying to figure out. There's evidence he'd been following her for weeks. Harassing her. Showing up at places she went. We found text messages on his phone, dozens of them, unanswered. They got worse over time."

"Yes," Eddie said immediately. His voice was stronger now, fueled by something hot and sharp in his chest. Anger. Grief. Both. "She told me that. She was scared of him. I'd been trying to look out for her. I know he went to her house last week and was looking through her bedroom window. She saw him."

The detectives looked at each other again. This time, the look was different. Sharper. Like pieces of a puzzle clicking together.

"She told you that directly?" Kelley asked.

"Yes. She was terrified. He was tormenting her. She said he wouldn't leave her alone."

Vinny spoke up from the doorway, his voice calm but direct, cutting through the tension. "Do you know why she did it?"

Detective Kelley turned to look at him. His face was grave. "We're still piecing it together, son. It's early yet."

He turned back to Eddie. His eyes were sad again. "The reason we came here, Eddie, is that Eva left a short letter. It was on her desk. Her parents found it this morning." He paused, measuring his words. "It mentioned you."

Eddie's breath caught in his throat. The room flashed white.

Detective Kelley reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small evidence bag. Inside was a piece of paper, notebook paper with blue lines. He removed it carefully and unfolded it. Then he pulled out a photocopy from his notebook and slid it across the table toward Eddie.

"This is a copy. We have to keep the original for evidence. I'm sorry."

Eddie's hands shook slightly as he picked it up.

The handwriting was Evie's. He recognized it instantly, small, neat, careful. She always wrote in cursive, even though nobody else did anymore. She said it was more beautiful. Three lines, written in blue ink.

1. Mom and Dad, I'm sorry
2. Tell Jake he won.

3. Tell Eddie Marcello I loved him.

Evie

The paper slipped from Eddie's hands and floated down to the table.

The world stopped.

Everything stopped.

The buzzing light. The dog barking. His mother's breathing. The traffic outside. All of it ceased to exist.

Tell Jake he won.

Tell Eddie Marcello I loved him.

Eddie couldn't breathe. His chest felt crushed, compressed, like someone had wrapped chains around his ribs and pulled them tight. The kitchen swam in and out of focus. His mother's tear-stained face, Detective Kelley's sad eyes, the photocopy lying on the table with Evie's handwriting, her final words.

I loved him.

Past tense.

Loved.

She'd loved him, and she'd killed herself anyway.

A memory flashed. Six months ago. The park near the beach. Evie sat on a bench with her copy of "The Violent Bear It Away," her dark hair falling across her face. Eddie sat beside her, trying to find the right words. She'd been talking about how heavy everything felt, how she didn't know if God really cared about her, specifically, about Evie Callahan from West Roxbury with all her problems and fears.

And Eddie had told her what he'd read about St. Gertrude, this medieval nun who wrote about Jesus. He'd told Evie that nothing gave Jesus more joy than confidence in His love. That trusting Him, even when everything felt dark, that was what He wanted most.

Evie had looked at him with those green eyes and asked, "You really believe that?"

And Eddie had said yes.

He'd told her to have confidence. To trust. To believe that God loved her and would carry her through anything.

And she'd loved him.

And it hadn't been enough.

Jake had won, and Eddie had failed her, and confidence meant nothing, and God had let her die, and she was gone and nothing, nothing, would ever make that right.

Life is useless and unbearable if God doesn't exist.

Maybe God didn't exist.

Or maybe God existed and just didn't care.

Or maybe confidence was just something people told themselves to get through the day.

Eddie stood up so fast that a half-filled coffee cup crashed to the floor. The sound was deafening in the small kitchen. His mother gasped. Detective Rossi reached out instinctively, as if Eddie might run.

But Eddie didn't run.

He stumbled toward the hallway, one hand pressed against the wall for balance. His fingers left sweaty prints on the wallpaper, the same faded floral pattern that had been there since he was a kid. His mother called his name, but kept moving.

He made it to the bathroom and slammed the door.

The lock clicked. Fluorescent light. White tile. The smell of bleach and mildew.

He fell to his knees in front of the toilet and vomited, hard, violent retching that tore at his throat and made his eyes water. Nothing came up but bile and spit, yellow and bitter. He kept heaving anyway, his whole body convulsing, trying to expel something that couldn't be expelled.

Tell Eddie Marcello I loved him.

Another wave of nausea. More retching. His knuckles white on the porcelain rim of the toilet. Sweat was dripping from his forehead. Saliva hanging in strings from his mouth.

He collapsed onto the cold tile floor and lay there, curled on his side, shaking. The floor was freezing against his cheek. He could see dust balls under the sink. A crack in the grout. His mother's pink bathrobe hanging on the back of the door.

Ordinary details.

Evie was dead.

Vinny stood outside the bathroom door. He didn't knock. Didn't try to go in. He just stood there, one hand flat against the wood, listening to his brother fall apart on the other side.

Eddie's mother stood beside him, her hand over her mouth, fresh tears streaming down her face.

In the kitchen, Detective Kelley looked at her. "Mrs. Marcello, is there anyone we can call? Family? Someone who should be here?"

She shook her head, wiping her eyes with a tissue. "His father," she said quietly. Then she added, "But that would be useless."

Kelley nodded. He'd seen enough broken families to understand.

Inside the bathroom, Eddie lay on the cold tile, staring at nothing.

Evie was dead.

And she'd loved him.

And he hadn't saved her.

Chapter 4

Vinny had given Eddie a half pint of whiskey before he left. "Just to help you sleep," he'd said, pressing the bottle into Eddie's hand. "Don't tell Ma."

"Eddie drank. The whiskey burned as it went down. He collapsed onto his bed without bothering to undress, letting the alcohol drag him under."

He woke in darkness.

The room was pitch black, no light from the street, no glow from the alarm clock: just absolute silence and the sound of his own breathing.

Then he heard her voice.

"Eddie, I'm waiting for you."

His entire body went rigid. Ice flooded his veins.

Evie's voice. Clear as if she were standing next to him. Not a memory. Not his imagination. Her actual voice, the same cadence, the same soft tone she used when she wanted him to listen.

"Follow me," the voice said. "It won't hurt."

Eddie shot upright in bed, his heart slamming against his ribs. He fumbled for the lamp on his nightstand, knocked it over, and heard it crash to the floor. His hands found the switch anyway, and yellow light flooded the room.

Empty.

No one there.

Just his bedroom. His posters on the wall, Marciano and Ali. His guitar in the corner. His dresser with clothes hanging out of the drawers. The whiskey bottle on its side on the floor, amber liquid spreading across the wood.

He was awake. He knew he was awake. This wasn't a dream.

"Evie?" His voice cracked. "Evie, if you loved me, why do you want me to kill myself?"

The question came out of him before he could stop it.

Silence.

Then, again, softer now, almost a whisper: "Eddie, I'm waiting for you. Follow me. It won't hurt."

Not Evie.

The realization cut through him. Whatever this was, it wasn't her. Couldn't be her. Evie would never ask him to do that. Never.

"God," Eddie whispered. His hands were shaking. "God, where are you? I need your help."

Nothing.

Just the pounding of his own pulse.

Then words came back to him. Old words. A prayer he'd heard a few months ago after Mass, old women kneeling in the pews while everyone else filed out. Mrs. O'Brien, Mrs. Lowrey, and a few others, their voices rising and falling together.

"Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills, have mercy on us."

He said it out loud. "Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills."

The voice stopped.

The oppressive weight in the room lifted as if a window had opened. Eddie sat on the edge of his bed, drenched in sweat, gripping his knees.

This wasn't a nightmare. He knew that. Whatever had just happened was real. Something had been in his room. Something had used Evie's voice to try to pull him into the same darkness that took her.

He stood up, testing his legs. The floor felt solid. Real. The lamp cast normal shadows.

No way he was going back to sleep.

Eddie pulled on his sneakers and left his bedroom. The house was quiet. His mother's door was closed, no light underneath. She'd cried herself to sleep hours ago. Vinny's door was open, his bed empty. Still out somewhere.

The kitchen was dark except for the green glow of the microwave clock—3:47 AM.

He found yesterday's coffee still in the pot. Cold and thick. He poured it into a mug and drank it black, standing at the sink, staring out the window at the empty street.

Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills.

The words kept repeating in his head. He didn't know what they meant, not really. Desire of the everlasting hills. It sounded ancient. Biblical, like something from a time when people still believed in demons and angels and spiritual warfare.

But he spoke, and it had worked.

Eddie finished the cold coffee and set the mug in the sink. His hands had stopped shaking. The fear was still there, but different now. Less panic, more dread. Something was hunting him.

He needed to move. Needed to do something physical. "God," Eddie whispered. His hands were shaking. "God, where are you? I need your help."

Nothing.

"He needed to move. Needed to do something physical before he lost it completely."

Sam's voice echoed in his head, gruff and no-nonsense: "You want to be a pro fighter? Then you gotta be in better shape than your opponent. Every day. No excuses."

Eddie changed into running clothes, old gym shorts, and a black hoodie. He laced up his sneakers and stepped out into the pre-dawn darkness.

The air was cold and damp, salt smell from the harbor mixed with exhaust and garbage. A few streetlights still burned yellow-orange. No cars yet. Just Eddie and the empty streets of South Boston.

He started running.

"His legs felt heavy at first, thick with whiskey and grief and sleeplessness. But he pushed through it. Footfalls on pavement. Breath in, breath out."

He ran down toward Carson Beach, following the water. The harbor stretched out black to his right, broken only by the lights of planes descending toward Logan. A cargo ship sat motionless in the distance, its deck lights like a small floating city.

After the first mile, Eddie started feeling better. His lungs burned, but it was clean pain. His mind cleared slightly. The rhythm of running pushed everything else back.

After the second mile, he slowed to a walk, hands on his hips, pulling in cold air.

He found himself standing at a redline station, the MBTA sign glowing above the entrance. A route map was posted behind scratched plexiglass. Eddie studied it, tracing the colored lines.

The green line caught his attention. He followed it to the end.

Forest Hills Station.

The words seemed to pulse.

Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills.

Hills.

Forest Hills.

Eddie stared at the map. His breath came out in white clouds. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed, then faded.

He didn't believe in coincidences. Not anymore. Not after what had just happened in his bedroom.

This was a sign.

He turned and started running back toward home, faster now, with purpose.

When he got back to the house, the sun was just starting to break over the horizon, turning the sky from black to deep blue to pale orange. His mother's bedroom light was on. He could hear her moving around inside, the floorboards creaking. Vinny's car was in the driveway.

Eddie went to his room and sat on the edge of his bed, chest heaving.

Forest Hills.

The Arnold Arboretum was right there, acres and acres of trees and hills and quiet. A place to get away from everything. From this house that smelled like grief. From his mother's tears. From the phone ringing with people offering condolences. From the voice that had spoken to him in the darkness.

He needed space. Needed to think, to breathe.

Eddie grabbed his backpack and started packing. A change of clothes. A water bottle. Some granola bars from the kitchen.

Then he remembered his phone.

He'd turned it off after the argument with Evie. Hadn't looked at it since.

Eddie dug it out from under a pile of clothes on his desk. The small Nokia felt heavy in his hand. He stared at it for a long moment, then pressed the power button.

The screen lit up. The startup chime played.

One new message.

His stomach dropped.

He opened it.

From: Evie
142

One letter. Four letters. Two letters.

I love you.

She'd sent it before she died. Maybe hours before. Maybe minutes. While his phone was off. While he was angry and hurt and ignoring her.

She'd reached out. She'd tried to tell him.

And he hadn't known.

Eddie's vision blurred. His throat closed up. He tried to breathe but couldn't get air. The phone fell from his hand onto the bed.

A sound tore through his chest. He doubled over, his face in his hands, and sobbed. She loved him. Even after the fight. Even after everything. She'd sent him that message, and he hadn't seen it.

If he'd just turned his phone on. If he'd just checked. If he'd just—

Eddie forced himself to stop. To breathe. To stand up

He couldn't do this. Couldn't fall apart. Not yet.

He picked up the phone and shoved it into the side pocket of his backpack. Then he grabbed his rosary from the desk drawer, the one his grandmother had given him for confirmation. He hadn't touched it in months.

He added it to the bag.

"Eddie went out to the garage through the kitchen. The space was cramped and cluttered, full of his father's old tools and junk nobody had sorted through in years. In the back corner, he found his pup tent and old sleeping bag.

He pulled them both out and brought them back inside.

"Vinny was in the kitchen now, pouring coffee. He looked exhausted, hair sticking up.

"You're up early," Vinny said.

"Couldn't sleep."

Vinny studied him. "Yeah. Me neither."

Eddie shifted the backpack on his shoulder, the tent and sleeping bag under his other arm. "Can you give me a ride somewhere?"

"Where?"

"Arnold Arboretum. I need to get away for a while. Clear my head."

Vinny set down his coffee mug. "Eddie, I don't know if that's a good idea. Being alone right now—"

"I can't stay here, Vin." Eddie's voice came out harder than he meant. "I need to get outta here."

Vinny was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Yeah. Okay. Let me tell Ma where you're going."

"She'll just worry."

"She's already worrying. At least this way she'll know you're safe."

Eddie didn't have the energy to argue. "Fine."

Vinny disappeared into their mother's room. Eddie heard low voices, his mother's rising in concern, Vinny's steady and reassuring. After a few minutes, Vinny came back out.

"She's not happy about it, but she understands. Said to take your phone and call if you need anything."

Eddie nodded.

Twenty minutes later, Vinny pulled the car up to the main entrance of the Arnold Arboretum. The grounds stretched out before them, hundreds of acres of trees and paths and rolling hills. Early morning light filtered through the canopy.

"You sure about this?"

Eddie nodded. "I'll be fine. Just need a day or two."

"Call me. I mean it. Anytime."

"I will."

Eddie got out of the car and slung the backpack over his shoulder, the tent and sleeping bag tucked under his arm. He watched Vinny drive away, the red taillights disappearing around the corner, and then he was alone.

Fifty feet down the trail, he saw the first warning: NO CAMPING - NO FIRES - \$5000 FINE.

The morning was quiet except for birds singing and the rustle of leaves. The path stretched ahead, winding between massive oak trees and maples just starting to turn. The air smelled clean, nothing like the exhaust and salt of South Boston. Eddie adjusted his load and started walking.

The path curved deeper into the Arboretum, away from the street noise, away from the city. Part of him knew he should feel scared or lonely, but mostly he just felt numb.

Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills.

The prayer kept cycling through his mind. He didn't understand why those particular words had stuck, why they'd come to him when he needed them most.

The path split. Eddie took the left fork, heading uphill toward the densest part of the forest. His legs ached from the earlier run, but he kept going. Up and up, into the trees, into the quiet.

After maybe twenty minutes, the path narrowed to barely more than a deer trail. The trees grew thicker here, their branches interlacing overhead to block out most of the light. It was cooler under the canopy, and the birdsong had faded to almost nothing.

Eddie pushed through some low-hanging branches and found himself in a small clearing. The ground was covered in pine needles and fallen leaves. A massive oak tree dominated the center, its trunk easily four feet across.

This was far enough.

Eddie dropped his gear against the oak tree and sat down, his back against the rough bark. From here, he couldn't see the path anymore. Couldn't see anything but trees in every direction.

He was alone.

Completely alone.

The silence pressed in on him. He closed his eyes and tried to pray, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, all he could think about was the message.

142.

I love you.

She'd loved him. Even at the end. Even after their fight over the bowling alley.

And he hadn't known.

Eddie opened his eyes and stared up at the canopy above, at the bits of sky visible between the leaves.

"What am I doing here?" he whispered.

The trees didn't answer.

He tried to sleep but couldn't. Twenty-four hours now with no sleep. His eyes burned.

He decided to make coffee and do some working out. He'd brought packages of instant coffee and four cans of Sterno.

No fires for camping, but he didn't think anyone could see the small blue flame from the Sterno. A tin cup held over it worked well enough. He drank the bitter coffee and decided to go for a run on the hills.

The movement helped. His legs found their rhythm on the trails. His mind cleared a little.

He thought about owning a boxing gym one day, helping kids who were in trouble, and weren't into getting their faces smashed into the canvas during the overhyped MMA matches. Sam had talked about someone taking over his gym when he got too old. Maybe that was an option. Maybe he'd have a bar or coffee shop attached so he could continue with the music of the Blues. The Blues bars were disappearing all over because of the DJs and karaoke that were beginning to take over the Cambridge and Boston clubs. Eddie considered himself old school when it came to the Blues. And karaoke, don't even get him started.

The run helped. For an hour, maybe two, he felt almost normal.

That night, he tried to sleep again.

He lay in his sleeping bag watching bats circle overhead, trying to catch the last of the bugs before winter took over. The temperature was dropping. He could see his breath

Then it came again.

Eddie, I love you. Follow me. I'm waiting. It won't hurt.

Evie's voice. Sweet. Gentle. Calling him.

His whole body went cold.

"Now he wished he was back at home. It dawned on him that it was a stupid idea to go into the dark woods to 'get away.' Whatever was after him had followed."

He saw things in the woods that seemed to be moving, but he couldn't figure out what they were. Deer in Roslindale? He supposed it could be deer. Maybe bobcats. Wild dogs.

He was talking himself into real fear now. The shapes moved between the trees. Circling. Getting closer.

Then the words came again, keeping time with his heartbeat:

FOLLOW ME. FOLLOW ME. FOLLOW ME.

Eddie sat up, his heart hammering.

Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills.

The words of the prayer came to him suddenly, clearly. He knew this had to refer to the hills of heaven. He understood now that the everlasting hills were the hills of HEAVEN, not Forest Hills station. That was just how he'd gotten the idea to come here. A manipulation? A trick? The everlasting hills were what he wanted, not to end his life and face the everlasting fires instead.

He decided then not to take any chances that he could change his mind.

He reached into his bag and took out the prescription bottle of sleeping pills he'd grabbed from the medicine cabinet on his way out the morning before. Both his mother and father took them. When they'd stopped taking them, they couldn't sleep, and they figured it was because they needed sleeping pills. Eddie had gotten the idea to bring them "just in case."

But now, holding the bottle in his hand, he knew.

That idea had come from the same place as Evie's voice.

It was the devil who was going after another soul.

His hands shook as he held the bottle. How many pills were in there? Enough. More than enough. He could take them all right now, lie down, and just... stop. The voice promised it wouldn't hurt. He'd be with Evie. No more pain.

His thumb moved to open the childproof cap.

Then something broke inside him, not broke down, but broke *through*.

No.

No.

Eddie remembered the prayer of St. Gertrude. The words came flooding back:

"O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, grant that I may aspire towards Thee with my whole heart, with yearning desire and with thirsting soul, seeking only Thy sweetness and Thy delights, so that my whole mind and all that is within me may ardently sigh to Thee, who art our true Beatitude."

He kept going, the words coming faster:

"O most merciful Lord, engrave Thy Wounds upon my heart with Thy most Precious Blood, that I may read in them both Thy grief and Thy love; and that the memory of Thy Wounds may ever remain in my inmost heart, to excite my compassion for Thy sufferings and to increase in me Thy love."

The bottle fell from his hands onto the pine needles.

Eddie dropped to his knees.

"Saint Michael the Archangel," he said out loud, his voice cracking, "defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil."

His hands found his rosary in his jacket pocket, smooth and solid.

He started packing. Sleeping bag shoved into its sack. Tent collapsed. He just needed to get out of here. Now.

Eddie walked through the Arnold Arboretum in the moonlight, his backpack on his shoulders, his rosary in his hands.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee..."

The shapes were still there in the woods. He could see them moving between the trees. But they didn't bother him now.

Not anymore.

His fingers moved from bead to bead.

"Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus..."

He thought of Christ's wounds. The nails through His hands and feet. The spear in His side. The crown of thorns. All that suffering.

Eddie had wanted to die. He'd been so close.

But he had to believe that God had other plans.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death..."

His feet found the main path. Then the entrance.

He kept praying all the way out of the woods until he reached the street. He pulled out his phone and sent Vinny a message to pick him up.

He was walking past Forest Hills Station when his brother's response came through.

Was this the sign he'd been looking for?

CHAPTER 5

Thomas Shea grew up in Charlestown, in a triple-decker on Monument Square, where you could see the Bunker Hill Monument from the kitchen window. His father was a longshoreman. His mother cleaned houses on Beacon Hill. They had seven kids, and Thomas was the youngest.

He was the smart one. The one the nuns at St. Catherine's said would "make something of himself." He got a scholarship to BC High, then another to Harvard. Pre-med. His parents cried at his graduation, their son, graduating from Harvard.

He went on to Harvard Medical School and specialized in psychiatry and neuroscience. By thirty, he was teaching at HMS—Neuroscience, Psychiatry, Behavioral Sciences, and Neurology. He published papers and wrote books on behavioral science.

His mother asked him once, at Sunday dinner, "Tommy, when are you going to settle down and get married, have a bunch of kids?"

He'd smiled and changed the subject. But the truth was, he'd been thinking about something else for years.

He'd been thinking about the priesthood.

At forty-five, Thomas Shea shocked everyone, his colleagues, his family, his friends, by retiring from Harvard Medical School and enrolling in theology studies at Beda College in Rome. Beda specialized in older men entering seminary, what they called "delayed vocations."

"You're throwing your life away," one of his department heads told him.

Thomas just smiled. "No," he said. "I'm finally finding it."

His goal was missionary work. Haiti. Africa. Places where people needed doctors and priests, not just one or the other.

At fifty-two, he was ordained by an SSPX bishop whom Archbishop Lefebvre had consecrated. He joined the Holy Ghost Fathers and got his assignment: Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Haiti was a revelation.

Father Benedict, who'd taken the name in honor of the saint who fought demons, thought he understood the human mind. He'd spent twenty years studying, teaching, and treating it.

But in Haiti, he saw things his textbooks couldn't explain.

People who spoke in languages they'd never learned. Who knew things they couldn't possibly know. Whose eyes went black, whose voices changed.

Possession.

Real, actual, demonic possession.

At first, his scientific training resisted it. There had to be another explanation: psychological trauma, dissociative disorders.

But then he witnessed an exorcism performed by an older priest, a Haitian who'd been doing this work for forty years. And Father Benedict saw, with his own eyes, a demon cast out in the name of Jesus Christ. Saw the person collapse, exhausted but free.

He began studying under the older priest. Learning the *Rituale Romanum*. Learning the prayers, the protocols, the spiritual warfare that most priests in America never encountered.

He learned about Voodoo, its African roots, and how it opened doors. He also learned about the occult and how it invited darkness in. The battle for souls was real, and demons were more active in some places than in others.

After seven years, his superiors reassigned him to Massachusetts, near the town where he grew up.

He was given St. Benedict's Chapel, a small place on M Street in South Boston, near the beach. Quiet. Out of the way. A semi-retirement assignment for a priest who'd spent years in the missions.

That's what they thought it was, anyway.

But Father Benedict knew better.

The demons he'd fought in Haiti weren't confined to Haiti. They were everywhere. And lately, they'd been especially active among young people.

Kids were killing themselves at alarming rates. Teen suicide was spiking. Father Benedict, with his background in psychiatry and exorcism, could see what others couldn't:

This wasn't just a mental health crisis.

It was a spiritual war.

And the enemy was winning.

Vinny pulled into the driveway just after midnight. They drove around until Eddie felt it was time to go home.

Eddie got out, shouldering his backpack, and followed his brother inside. The house was dark. Their parents were asleep.

Vinny flipped on the kitchen light and sat down at the table. Eddie sat across from him.

"You okay?"

Eddie nodded. "Yeah. I'm okay."

Vinny studied his face, trying to decide if that was true. "You scared me, Eddie. When you texted me to pick you up... I thought—" He stopped. "I don't know what I thought."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Vinny rubbed his face. "Look, there's some stuff you need to know. While you were gone."

Eddie waited.

"Evie's parents had the funeral. It was private. Just family. They didn't want... they didn't want it to be a thing, you know? A spectacle."

Eddie nodded. Heat crept up his neck.

"School's closed until Tuesday. Long weekend. Giving everyone time to... I don't know. Process, I guess." Vinny paused. "And there's a reporter from the Globe. She called here looking for you. Wants to talk to you for a story she's doing on teen suicides."

"What did you tell her?"

"That it's too early. That you'd be in touch if you wanted to talk." Vinny slid a business card across the table. "She left this."

Eddie looked at the card but didn't pick it up. "I don't want to talk to a reporter."

"I figured. But I told her I'd give you the message." Vinny stood up. "You should get some sleep. You look like hell. Eddie flinched at the word.

He went upstairs to his room, took off his shoes, and lay down on his bed.

Before he closed his eyes, he repeated the prayers he said in the woods. Then he took his rosary from his pocket and held it in his hands.

"Hail Mary, full of grace..."

He fell asleep before he finished the first decade.

No voices came.

The next day, Saturday afternoon, Eddie decided he needed to go to confession.

"He walked to St. Joseph's, the neighborhood church where his family had gone since he was a kid. It was 3 PM when he got there, and the parking lot was packed.

He looked inside and knew this wouldn't work.

The line for confession stretched all the way to the back of the church. And he recognized almost everyone in it, classmates from school, kids from the neighborhood, people he'd known his whole life.

After Evie's suicide, they all wanted to go to confession. They were all scared.

Eddie stood in the doorway for a long moment, watching them. Then he turned around and left.

He couldn't do it. Not here. Not with people who knew him, who knew about Evie, who would look at him and wonder what he was confessing.

He needed to go somewhere else. Somewhere anonymous.

Eddie walked for over an hour, past the familiar streets of his neighborhood, past the places he and Evie used to go, until he found himself near the beach.

That's when he saw it.

A small chapel on M Street. The sign out front read: **St. Benedict's Chapel - Confessions Saturday 3-5 PM or by appointment.**

The building was old, made of gray stone that looked like it had been there forever. The door was open. No cars in the tiny parking lot. No line of people waiting.

Eddie walked inside.

The chapel was small, maybe twenty pews, with stained glass windows that cast colored light across the wooden floor. It smelled like incense and burnt candles. Quiet. Peaceful.

There was a confessional in the corner, a light on above it indicating a priest was inside.

Eddie walked over, stepped inside, and knelt in the darkness of the confessional booth.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," he began. His voice cracked. "It's been...six months since my last confession."

"Go ahead, my son." The voice on the other side of the screen was Boston, but educated. Gentle.

Eddie took a breath. And then he told the priest everything.

"He talked about Evie. The guilt. Going into the woods, planning to kill himself. The voices, Evie's voice, calling him to follow her. The sleeping pills in his hand and how close he'd come.

About the prayer that saved his life.

When he finished, there was a long silence.

Then the priest spoke.

"The enemy wanted your soul," he said quietly. "But you resisted. You prayed. And God protected you."

Another pause.

"For your penance, say the rosary every day this week. The full rosary, all five mysteries."

"Yes, Father."

And one more thing. I'd like you to come back here. Monday afternoon, if you can. There are things you need to know about what happened to you.

Things that will help you understand the battle you're in."

Eddie hesitated. "What do you mean, Father?"

"I'll explain when you come back. Can you be here on Monday, say, 2 PM?"

"Yes, Father. I can."

"Good. Now make a good Act of Contrition."

Eddie said the prayer. The priest gave him absolution. Then Eddie left the confessional and knelt in one of the pews.

He pulled out his rosary and began. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty..."

The Apostles' Creed. The Our Father. Three Hail Marys. The Glory Be.

Then the decades. He began with the Joyful mysteries. Hail Mary, full of grace...

His fingers moved over the beads, one by one. The rhythm of the prayers calmed him.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

Fifteen minutes later, he finished the final prayer and made the sign of the cross.

When he looked up, the priest was standing at the altar, extinguishing candles. He wore a simple black cassock.

He turned and saw Eddie watching him.

"I'm Father Benedict," he said, walking over. "Father Benedict Shea."

Eddie stood up. "Eddie Marcello."

Father Benedict studied him for a moment, the way a doctor might study a patient. Then he smiled. "You did well, Eddie. Recognizing the attack. Turning to prayer. Many people don't. They listen to the voices, and they act on them."

"I almost did, Father."

"But you didn't. That's what matters." Father Benedict paused. "Have you heard of spiritual warfare?"

"A little. In religion class."

"What you experienced in those woods was spiritual warfare. A demonic attack. The voice you heard, that was not your friend. That was a demon impersonating her."

Eddie went still. He'd suspected as much, but hearing a priest say it out loud made it real.

"How... how did you know?" Eddie asked.

"'Because I've seen it before. Many times. Especially lately.' Father Benedict gestured to the pews. 'Sit. We have some time before I have to lock up.'"

They sat together in the quiet chapel.

"I spent seven years in Haiti,' Father Benedict began. 'Working in the missions. And I saw things there that most Americans don't believe exist. Possession. Demonic activity. When I came back here, I thought I'd left all that behind.'

He shook his head.

"But it's happening here too. Maybe even more than in Haiti, because here, people don't recognize it. They think it's just mental illness. Just depression. Just teenagers being dramatic."

"But it's not?" Eddie asked.

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's purely psychological. But other times... Father Benedict looked at him. 'Other times, there's a spiritual component. An enemy who wants to destroy souls. And he's very active right now, especially among young people.'"

Eddie thought about the Globe reporter. The story on teen suicides. "Is that why so many kids are killing themselves?"

"Some of them, yes. Not all. But some.' Father Benedict leaned forward. 'The devil is a liar, Eddie. That's his primary weapon. He tells you you're worthless, that God doesn't love you, and that death is better than life. He impersonates the voices of people you love to manipulate you.'

Eddie nodded. That was exactly what had happened.

"'But he has weaknesses,' Father Benedict continued. 'He can't force you to do anything. He can only tempt. He can only lie. And when you resist him, when you call on God, he has to flee.'"

"That's what happened in the woods," Eddie said. "When I started praying... the voice stopped."

"Exactly. Because you chose God over the lie, and that's a choice the devil can't overcome."

They sat in silence for a moment.

Then Father Benedict said, "Come back Monday at 2 PM. I want to teach you more about this. How to recognize the enemy's tactics. How to protect your soul. How to fight back."

"Okay," "I'll be here."

"Good." Father Benedict stood up. "And Eddie? You're going to be okay. God saved your life for a reason. Don't waste it."

Eddie walked out of St. Benedict's Chapel into the late afternoon sun, feeling lighter than he had in weeks.

For the first time since Evie died, he had hope.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Before we continue with Eddie's story, I need to address something important.

This book discusses spiritual warfare and its connection to teen suicide and depression. Some of what you'll read may make you question whether the medications you're taking are helping or hurting you.

*Please hear this clearly: **If you are currently taking any psychiatric medications—antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, mood stabilizers, or anything else prescribed by a doctor, DO NOT stop taking them without your doctor's guidance.***

Many of these medications change your brain chemistry, and stopping them suddenly can cause severe withdrawal symptoms, including increased suicidal thoughts, rage, anxiety, and physical illness. Your brain needs time to readjust, and that process must be supervised by a medical professional.

Let me give you an example: A teenage girl was prescribed an SSRI (a type of antidepressant) for anxiety. She took it for several months, and when she felt better, she decided she didn't need it anymore. She stopped taking it cold turkey—just quit, without telling her doctor or her parents.

Within days, everything changed. She became angry, furious, at everyone around her. She got into fights at school with other girls over nothing. She screamed at her parents. She couldn't control her rage. Her family thought she was having a breakdown. She thought she was losing her mind.

What she was actually experiencing was severe withdrawal. Her brain had become dependent on the medication, and when she stopped suddenly, her neurochemistry went haywire. It wasn't until she went back on the medication and then slowly tapered off, under medical supervision, over several months, that she returned to normal.

*That's why I'm telling you this: **never stop psychiatric medications on your own.** If you think you don't need them anymore, talk to your doctor. Work with them to reduce your dosage safely. Don't make yourself sicker or put yourself in danger by quitting cold turkey.*

The spiritual warfare discussed in this book is not a replacement for proper medical care. Prayer and medicine can work together. God gave us doctors and medications for a reason.

But spiritual warfare is real. And sometimes what looks like a purely medical problem has a spiritual component that medication alone cannot address.

If you're experiencing suicidal thoughts right now, please call 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) or go to your nearest emergency room immediately. Now, back to Eddie's story...

Chapter 6: The Package

Monday morning, 10:47 AM.

Eddie was in the kitchen making a sandwich when he heard the mail truck pull up outside. Through the window, he could see the postal carrier, Mr. Turner, walking up the front steps with a stack of letters and what looked like a cardboard tube.

The doorbell rang.

Eddie wiped his hands on a dish towel and opened the front door.

'Package for Eddie Marcello,' Mr. Turner said, checking the label. He held out the cardboard tube, the kind people used to mail posters or architectural drawings. "Need you to sign for it."

Eddie took the electronic signature pad and scrawled his name. "Thanks, Mr. Turner."

"You got it, kid.' He handed him the tube along with a few bills and catalogs. "Have a good one."

Eddie closed the door and looked at the package.

It was about two feet long, lightweight, and sealed with tape on both ends. The shipping label had his name and address printed in neat block letters:

**EDDIE MARCELLO
1247 MAPLE STREET
BOSTON, MA**

But there was no return address.

And, Eddie looked closer, no postmark. No stamps. No tracking number.

Just his name and address.

How had this gone through the postal system without postage?

Eddie carried the package upstairs to his room and closed the door. He sat on his bed and examined the tube more carefully. The cardboard was clean, unmarked except for the label. No dents, no scuffs. Like it had been packed yesterday.

He peeled off the tape on one end and tilted the tube. Three rolled pages slid out onto his bed.

Sheet music.

Eddie unrolled the pages carefully. They were thick, cream-colored sheets, not modern copy paper but something heavier, older-looking. The edges were slightly yellowed.

The music was handwritten in black ink. Not printed. *Hand-written.*

Eddie had been playing guitar since he was eight. He could read music, standard notation, not just guitar tabs. But this music looked different. The notes were there, the staff was there, but the layout was unfamiliar. Complex chords in the left hand, a flowing melody in the right.

This wasn't written for guitar.

He studied the first page. The clefs were strange, an ornate treble clef on top, but the bottom staff had a different symbol he didn't recognize. The note heads were slightly diamond-shaped instead of oval.

This was music from a long time ago. Truly ancient.

Eddie flipped to the second page. More of the same. Flowing melody, complex harmonies. Key signature: no sharps, no flats. C major, probably.

He turned to the third page.

At the bottom, below the final measures, someone had written in what looked like calligraphy, the kind done with a feather quill, not a modern pen:

Zweite Chancen

Eddie's German class had just covered common phrases last week. He recognized the words immediately.

Second Chances: The Song of Life.

And below the title, in the same elegant handwriting:

This is your sign. Continue to pray.

— *Sankt Gertrud*

Eddie's hands went cold.

Sankt Gertrud. Saint Gertrude.

The saint he'd been praying to since he'd read her book, *The Herald of Divine Love*.

He read the message again, his heart pounding.

This is your sign. Continue to pray.

Eddie looked at the cardboard tube lying on his bed. No return address. No postmark.

Just three pages of centuries-old music and a message from a medieval saint.

He sat there for a long moment, staring at the music, trying to understand what this meant.

Then he heard footsteps in the hallway. A knock on his door.

"Eddie?" Vinny's voice. "You there?"

"Yeah. Come in."

The door opened. Vinny stepped inside, still wearing his work shirt. He must have come home on his lunch break.

"Hey, I just—" Vinny stopped, seeing the expression on Eddie's face. "What's wrong?"

Eddie held up the sheet music. "I need to show you something." Vinny sat on the edge of the bed, examining the three pages Eddie had spread out on the blanket.

"Where did this come from?" Vinny asked.

"Mail," Eddie said. "Just now. Mr. Turner delivered it."

"Who sent it?"

"I don't know. There's no return address. Look." Eddie showed him the cardboard tube, pointing to the label. "No postage either. No tracking. Nothing."

Vinny frowned. "That's weird. How did it get through the postal system?"

"Beats me."

Vinny picked up the third page, reading the handwritten note at the bottom. His eyes widened. "Eddie...this says Saint Gertrude."

"I know."

"The saint you've been praying to."

"I know."

Vinny looked at his brother. "You think this is real? Like, actually from her?"

Eddie nodded slowly. "Father Benedict told me to pray to her for protection. And now this shows up. No postmark, no return address, just... appears, with a message that says 'This is your sign.'"

Vinny set the page down carefully, like it might disintegrate if he handled it too roughly.

"What kind of music is this?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's not guitar music. Looks like it's written for... I don't know, piano maybe? But it's old. Medieval. Look at the way the notes are shaped. The ink. This isn't something you print off the internet."

Vinny studied the first page. "Can you play it?"

"Not yet. I'd have to figure out how to translate it to guitar. The chords are different. The notation is different. But I think I could learn it."

"What's it called? 'Zweite Chancen'?" Vinny's pronunciation was rough, but close enough.

"It's German," Eddie said. "Means 'Second Chances.'"

Vinny looked at him. "Second chances. Like... what you got? When you didn't take those pills in the woods?"

Eddie hadn't thought of it that way, but Vinny was right.

He'd been sitting in those woods, the bottle of sleeping pills in his hand, ready to end it all. And something, someone, had stopped him. Kept him from swallowing the pills. Given him a second chance.

"Yeah," Eddie said quietly. "Like that."

Vinny handed the pages back to Eddie. "So, what are you going to do?"

"I'm meeting Father Benedict this afternoon at two. I was going to talk to him about spiritual warfare, learn more about what he told me Saturday. But now..." Eddie looked at the music. "Now I think I'm supposed to show him this."

"You think he'll know what it means?"

"I think he'll know more than I do."

Vinny stood up, glancing at his watch. "I have to get back to work. But Eddie?"

"Yeah?"

"I believe you. I don't know what this is or how it got here, but I believe something real is happening to you. Something... I don't know. Supernatural."

Eddie nodded. "Thanks, Vin."

"Just be careful, okay? If you're mixed up in spiritual warfare stuff, that means there's an enemy. And the enemy doesn't want you to succeed."

"I know."

"Pray. Keep praying. And talk to Father Benedict."

"I will."

After Vinny left, Eddie sat alone in his room, looking at the three pages of music spread across his bed.

Zweite Chancen.

Second Chances.

He picked up his guitar and tried to work out the first few measures, translating the piano-style notation to guitar chords. The chords were complex, the fingerings unfamiliar.

But there was something about the melody, something simple and beautiful, even though he could only play fragments of it.

He'd figure it out.

He had to.

Because this was a mission. Saint Gertrude had sent him this music for a reason.

And Eddie had a feeling that reason was about to become clear.

Eddie arrived at St. Benedict's Chapel at 1:53 PM. The November afternoon was cold and gray. He pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the quiet warmth of the sanctuary.

The chapel was empty except for an elderly woman praying the rosary in a back pew. Candles flickered near the statue of Mary, and the scent of incense lingered in the air from morning Mass.

Eddie genuflected and crossed himself, then slid into one of the front pews. He set his backpack beside him, the rolled sheet music tucked carefully inside, and waited.

Five minutes later, Father Benedict emerged from the sacristy. He was wearing his black clerical shirt and Roman collar, his reading glasses hanging from a chain around his neck. When he saw Eddie, his face lit up with a warm smile.

"Eddie! Right on time." He walked down the center aisle and sat in the pew beside him. "How are you doing? How was your weekend?"

"Better," Eddie said. "I've been praying. The Rosary you gave me as a penance, I've been praying it every day since. And I've been praying to Saint Gertrude."

Father Benedict's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Every day? That's wonderful, Eddie. And Saint Gertrude? How did you come to pray to her?"

"I found her. Or maybe she found me. I found an old book left by my grandmother, The Herald of Divine Love. So, I started asking her for help."

"That's very good, Eddie. She's a powerful intercessor, especially against demonic attack."

Eddie nodded. "I feel better. Different. Like something lifted."

"That's grace working in you." Father Benedict settled back in the pew, his expression becoming more serious. "Eddie, I want to talk to you about something. Something important."

"Okay."

The priest was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Then he said, "When you came to me Saturday, after your confession, you asked me why this was happening to you, why you'd been attacked, why you felt driven to end your life."

"Yeah."

"I told you it was spiritual warfare. That the enemy was trying to destroy you before you could fulfill God's mission for your life."

Eddie remembered. "You said the devil goes after people who are a threat to him."

"Exactly." Father Benedict leaned forward, resting his forearms on the pew in front of them. "Eddie, we're in the middle of an epidemic. And most people don't even recognize it for what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Suicide," Father Benedict said quietly. "Particularly among young people. The numbers are staggering. Do you know that suicide is now the third leading cause of death for young people ages fifteen to twenty-four? Third. Behind only accidents and homicide."

Eddie felt a chill run through him.

"And for younger children, ages ten to fourteen, the rates have doubled in the last fifteen years. *Doubled*. We're talking about three hundred to three hundred fifty children in that age group dying by suicide every year in this country. Children, Eddie. Ten, eleven, twelve years old."

Eddie stared at him. "That's..."

"Horrible. Yes." Father Benedict's voice was heavy with grief. "And for every child who dies, there are fifty to a hundred more who attempt it."

The lady in the back pew stood up, genuflected, and quietly left the chapel. Now Eddie and Father Benedict were alone.

"Why?" Eddie asked. "Why is it happening?"

"There are many factors," Father Benedict said. "Social isolation. Academic pressure. Family breakdown. The culture of death that permeates our society. But Eddie, beneath all of those surface causes, there's a deeper reality."

"Spiritual warfare."

"Yes." Father Benedict turned to face him fully. "The enemy is targeting the young. He's always targeted the vulnerable, the sick, the poor, the broken. But now he's going after children and teenagers with unprecedented ferocity. Because he knows something."

"What?"

"He knows that this generation, *your* generation, has the potential to turn the tide. To bring change. To bring souls back to Christ. So, he's trying to destroy you before you can fulfill your mission."

Eddie thought about the woods. The bottle of pills. The voice that had whispered *Follow me. I'm waiting for you. It won't hurt*.

"That's what was happening to me," he said quietly. "In the woods. Those thoughts, that voice, it wasn't mine."

"No. They were planted. Cultivated. The enemy is a liar and a murderer from the beginning, as Scripture says. He whispers lies until people believe them. He disguises himself. And he's looking to deceive."

Father Benedict reached over and gripped Eddie's shoulder.

"But you didn't act on it. You were stopped. Protected. And now you're here, alive, sitting in this chapel. Do you know what that means?"

Eddie shook his head.

"It means God has a mission for you, Eddie. A purpose. I don't know what it is yet; I don't think you know either. But it's real. And it's important. Important enough that the enemy tried to kill you before you could discover it."

Eddie felt something stirring in his chest. Not fear this time. Something else. Something like... hope.

"How do I find out what the mission is?" he asked.

"You pray. You listen. You watch for signs." Father Benedict smiled. "God doesn't usually send us a detailed blueprint. He reveals things step by step, as we're ready. Your job is to stay close to Him. Stay in prayer. Stay in the sacraments. Stay vigilant against the enemy's attacks."

Eddie took a breath. "Father, I think... I think I might have gotten a sign."

Father Benedict raised his eyebrows. "What kind of sign?"

Eddie reached into his backpack and pulled out the cardboard tube. "This came in the mail this morning. No return address. No postmark. Just... showed up."

He handed the tube to Father Benedict, who opened it and slid out the three pages of sheet music.

The priest was silent for a long moment, studying the pages. His expression shifted from curiosity to wonder.

"Eddie," he said softly. "Where did you say this came from?"

"The mail. The postman delivered it. But there was no return address. No stamps. Nothing."

Father Benedict turned to the third page and read the handwritten note at the bottom.

Zweite Chancen. This is your sign. Continue to pray. — Sankt Gertrud

He looked up at Eddie, his eyes bright.

"Saint Gertrude," he whispered. "The saint you've been praying to."

"I know."

Father Benedict stood up, still holding the pages. "Come with me."

Father Benedict led Eddie up a narrow staircase at the back of the chapel. The wooden steps creaked under their feet. At the top was a small loft that housed the pipe organ, a modest

instrument compared to the grand organs of cathedrals, but still impressive. The console sat facing the sanctuary below, with two manuals, a pedalboard, and rows of stops.

"I didn't know you played organ," Eddie said.

"I'm no expert," Father Benedict said, settling onto the bench. "But I studied music in seminary. I can read well enough." He set the sheet music on the music rack and adjusted his reading glasses. "Let's see what Saint Gertrude has sent you."

Eddie, this is written for a harpsichord.

He pulled out a few stops, soft foundation stops, flutes and strings, and placed his hands on the keys. Then he began to play.

The first notes floated through the chapel like a question. Tentative. Searching. The melody was simple at first, almost childlike, moving through minor keys with a sense of longing.

Father Benedict's fingers moved across the keys with careful precision. The left hand provided a steady foundation while the right hand carried the melody higher. The harmonies shifted, minor to major, darkness to light.

Then the melody changed.

It opened up. What had been tentative became confident. The music swelled, not with triumph exactly, but with something deeper. Hope. Redemption. A second chance.

Eddie felt tears welling in his eyes. The music was reaching something inside him that he didn't have words for. Some deep place of pain and healing, all mixed together.

Father Benedict continued through the second page. The melody developed and grew richer. There were moments of darkness, brief returns to the minor key.

By the time Father Benedict reached the final measures, Eddie's face was wet with tears. The music ended on a major chord that hung in the air of the chapel, resonating through the pipes.

Father Benedict held the final chord, then slowly released it. The sound faded into silence. For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Finally, Father Benedict turned on the bench to face Eddie. His own eyes were glistening.

"Eddie," he said softly. "That is a gift from heaven."

Why did it make me tear up? "It's called the gift of tears, Eddie. *Donum lacrimarum*. The Church has known about it for centuries. When music, or prayer, or beauty reaches past your defenses straight to your soul, sometimes the only response is tears. Not sad tears necessarily, but tears of... opening. Of release."

"Why does it do that?"

"Because it's truth. Raw, honest truth. And truth has a way of breaking through the walls we build. Your song does that. It touches something deep that people have been trying to protect, trying to hide. And when it touches that place..."

He gestured to his own tear-stained face.

"The tears wash something away. Years of pain, maybe. Hardness. The weight of carrying everything alone. That's why they feel different from ordinary crying - there's relief in them. Healing."

Eddie wiped his face.

"I wasn't trying to do that."

"That's how you know it's God's gift, not your manipulation. You just told the truth in your music."

"It's beautiful," Eddie said.

"It's more than beautiful. It's anointed." Father Benedict looked down at the sheet music. "This is your sign. This is what I was talking about, God revealing His mission for you."

"But what does it mean? What am I supposed to do with it?"

Father Benedict stood up and placed both hands on Eddie's shoulders. "You're supposed to learn it. Play it. Share it. This music, *Zweite Chancen*, Second Chances, carries a message that people need to hear. Especially young people, those who are suffering."

Eddie felt a shiver run through him.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Father Benedict continued. "This music is a weapon, Eddie. A weapon against the enemy who tried to destroy you. It's a weapon of hope, a weapon against a society steeped in death."

"But I'm not even that good," Eddie protested. "It's not for guitar. I'd need months to learn something like this."

"Then take months. Take as long as you need." Father Benedict smiled. "God isn't in a hurry. He's been planning this since before you were born. You'll learn it when you're ready to learn it. And when you do, you'll know what to do with it."

Eddie looked down at the sheet music on the organ's music rack. The handwritten note at the bottom of the third page seemed to glow in the afternoon light.

This is your sign. Continue to pray.

Eddie took a breath. "I've been thinking... about what you said. About the enemy targeting young people. About suicide being an epidemic." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "This music, *Zweite Chancen*, Second Chances, it's about going from darkness to light, from despair to hope. And it came to me. To *me*, someone who almost..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"Someone who almost became another statistic," Father Benedict said gently.

"Yes. But I didn't. I was saved. And now I have this music." Eddie looked up at the priest. "Father, I think... I think maybe I'm supposed to help other kids who are going through what I went through."

Father Benedict's eyes lit up. "Go on."

"I don't know exactly how yet," Eddie admitted. "But that's what this feels like. Like I'm being given a second chance so I can... so I can give hope to others who need it."

Father Benedict was very still, listening intently.

"That's not a coincidence, is it?" Eddie continued. "Music called 'Second Chances.' Music about going from darkness to light. From despair to hope. Sent by Saint Gertrude, right after I started praying to her for help against spiritual attacks."

"No," Father Benedict said softly. "That's not a coincidence. That's God showing you HIS divine will."

Eddie straightened in his chair. He didn't know exactly what to do next, but for the first time in weeks, he felt like he knew what direction to go.

"So, what do I do now?" he asked.

Father Benedict picked up the sheet music, carefully rolled it back into the cardboard tube, and handed it to Eddie.

"You do what the note says. You continue to pray. You learn this music. You stay close to the sacraments. You watch and listen for the next sign." He paused. "And you be patient with yourself. You're still healing, Eddie. Don't rush the process. God will show you the next step when you're ready."

Eddie took the tube and held it carefully, like something precious.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course."

"Do you think... do you think Saint Gertrude really sent this? Like, actually sent it? From heaven?"

Father Benedict smiled. "I think the communion of saints is far more real and active than most of us imagine. I think the saints intercede for us constantly. And I think sometimes, God allows them to reach across the veil in extraordinary ways." He gestured to the tube in Eddie's hands. "The postman delivered this to your house. But it had no return address, no stamps, no postmark. Just a note signed by the saint you just started praying to."

Eddie thought about it. About Saint Gertrude's book. About the woods, the Everlasting Hills, this music arrived the very next day. About the message written at the bottom: *This is your sign.*

"It's a miracle," he said quietly.

"I believe it is." Father Benedict paused, then said, "Eddie, do you know the Latin words *Spes Nostra Salve?*"

Eddie shook his head. "No."

"It's a title used for Our Lady. It means 'Hail Our Hope.'" Father Benedict's voice was warm with conviction. "You remember those words and say them often. This is what young people need: hope. Hope in their salvation. Hope that God is trying to help them. Not despair. Not the enemy's lies. True hope."

Eddie felt the words settle into his heart. *Spes Nostra Salve. Hail Our Hope.*

"That's what the music is about," he said slowly. "Second chances. Hope. Salvation."

"Exactly. And that's the message you'll carry to other young people who are suffering."

They stood at the organ for another moment, listening to the silence of the chapel. Then Father Benedict glanced at his watch. "I have confessions at three, but I want you to take that music home. Look at it. Pray with it. When you're ready to start learning it, let me know. I can help you work through the difficult passages."

"You'd do that?"

"Eddie, I told you Saturday that I believe God has a mission for you. If this music is part of that mission, then helping you learn it is part of *my* mission." He smiled. "We're in this together now."

Eddie felt different. Not just grateful. Hopeful.

"Thank you, Father."

"Thank you for listening to God's call and for being willing to step into this mission, whatever it turns out to be." Father Benedict walked him back down the narrow stairs to the main level of the chapel. "Keep praying that Rosary every day. Keep asking for Saint Gertrude's intercession. And one more thing, be careful. The enemy knows what you're doing now. He'll try to derail you. He'll try to discourage you. He'll try to make you doubt." Father Benedict's voice grew serious.

"Stay vigilant. Stay in prayer. And if you feel attacked again, if those dark thoughts come back, you call me immediately. Day or night. Understood?"

"Understood."

They stood at the door of the chapel. Through the stained-glass windows, Eddie could see the gray November afternoon fading.

"Go home," Father Benedict said gently. "Be with your family. Practice your regular pieces for your lesson tomorrow. Don't try to tackle the new music yet. Just sit with it. Pray with it. Let it speak to you."

Eddie nodded. He tucked the cardboard tube carefully into his backpack.

"Father?" he said. "One more thing."

"Yes?"

"When you played that music... I felt something. Like the music was doing something. Not just making sound, but actually... changing things. Does that make sense?"

Father Benedict's face broke into a wide smile.

"Perfect sense," he said. "That's what sacred music does, Eddie. It doesn't just entertain or please the ear. It opens doors. It moves hearts. It carries grace." You'll know when you're ready to play it, when you can feel that same thing flowing through you to others."

Eddie felt a shiver. And maybe a little fear.

"I don't know if I'll ever be good enough for that."

"You won't be," Father Benedict said simply. "None of us are good enough for the things God calls us to do. That's the whole point. It's not about your skill or how talented you are; it's about your willingness. Your surrender to God's divine will." With that, Father Benedict blessed him with the sign of the cross, and Eddie stepped out into the cold November afternoon.

As he walked home, the cardboard tube safely in his backpack, Eddie felt different from how he had just two hours ago. Lighter. More alive.

Chapter 7: The Words

Eddie spent the next week working on the music.

He didn't try to learn it on piano, not yet. The piece was too complex for his current skill level. But as he studied the three pages of handwritten notation, running through the melody in his mind, he began to hear something else. A simpler arrangement.

Guitar.

He could play it on the guitar.

Monday after school, he sat in his room with his acoustic guitar and the sheet music propped on his music stand. He started with just the melody line, picking out the notes one at a time. The opening theme that Father Benedict had played on the organ translated beautifully to the guitar's warmer, more intimate sound.

By Thursday, he could play the entire piece from memory. He'd worked out a fingerpicking arrangement that let him play the melody and chords simultaneously, a technique he'd been working on for months, something he picked up from hearing slowed-down recordings of Joe Pass concerts. His fingers moved across the strings with a precision that surprised even him.

Eddie had learned music the way most kids in his generation did, by ear. Cassettes worn thin from rewinding, 45s played until the grooves were smooth. He'd spent countless hours with his headphones on, lifting the needle and dropping it again and again until he could replicate what he heard. Some classical pieces too, though those were harder without sheet music. But this piece, "Zweite Chancen", was different. He had the notation, but he was still learning it his own way. Listening to the melody in his head, feeling out the chords, letting his fingers find their own path.

But something was still missing.

The music was beautiful. Hopeful. But it needed something more.

It needed words.

Friday afternoon, Eddie took his guitar down to the Red Line at Andrew station. His usual spot was near the turnstiles, where commuters rushed past in their hurry to catch trains.

He started with his standard repertoire. "Blackbird." "Dust in the Wind." "Landslide." "Danny Boy." Songs that usually got at least a few people to pause, to drop a dollar or some change in his open guitar case.

Today, nobody stopped.

The crowd flowed around him. Eyes forward, minds elsewhere, the eternal rush of the city drowning out his music.

After half an hour of being invisible, Eddie stopped mid-song. His fingers hovered over the strings.

Play it. Play the new song.

He didn't have lyrics yet. Just the melody and chords he'd been working on. But his fingers moved to the opening position almost on their own.

He began to play "Zweite Chancen."

The fingerpicking pattern filled the subway station with a sound completely different from the songs he'd been playing. Richer. Deeper. The melody rose and fell, weaving through the chord progressions like a prayer set to music.

People still rushed past. The trains still rumbled in the distance. But something had changed.

An old man shuffled toward him. Homeless, by the look of him, no coat, just layers of worn clothing, a graying beard, eyes that had seen too much hardness. He stopped a few feet from Eddie's guitar case and stood there, listening.

Eddie kept playing, watching the man out of the corner of his eye.

As the melody built toward its climax, the part that would eventually become the chorus, tears began running down the old man's weathered face. He stood perfectly still, transfixed, as the music washed over him.

When Eddie finished the piece and let the final chord fade into the subway's ambient noise, the man stepped forward. His hand shook as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a single dime. He dropped it carefully into Eddie's guitar case, probably all the money he had in the world, then turned and shuffled away.

"Wait!" Eddie called out.

The man stopped but didn't turn around.

Eddie quickly set down his guitar and shrugged out of his leather jacket, the ripped one he'd worn for two years, his favorite, broken in just right. He caught up to the old man and held it out.

"Here. Take this."

The man turned, his eyes red from crying. "I can't—"

"Please," Eddie said. "I want you to have it."

Their eyes met for a long moment. Then the old man took the jacket with trembling hands, clutched it to his chest, and walked away into the crowd.

Eddie stood there in his t-shirt, watching the man disappear down the platform. His heart was pounding.

The song was special. Not just to him. Not just because it had come from heaven, it moved people. That homeless man had given everything he had, ten cents, because the music had touched him.

This was proof.

Whatever came next, Eddie knew the song was meant to be shared.

Friday night, Eddie sat alone in his room with his guitar. His parents had gone to bed an hour ago. The house was quiet except for the occasional creak of settling wood and the distant hum of the furnace.

He played through "Zweite Chancen" again. The music told a story; he could feel it. A journey from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life.

Second chances. A Song of Life

He thought back to that day in the woods. The bottle of sleeping pills in his hands. The crushing weight of hopelessness that had driven him to the edge.

Three hundred sixty-five days in a year...

The words came suddenly, Eddie's fingers stilled on the guitar strings.

Some people think life's not clear. There's no reason to go on. No reason to go on.

He grabbed a pen and his spiral notebook from his desk and started writing. The words came fast. He wrote frantically, barely able to keep up.

Pain and sadness consume their minds. They think that their whole life's a lie. But God knows the way. To life, to life.

The chorus came next, strong and clear:

It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way. It's time for second chances if you pray...

Eddie's hand was shaking as he wrote. He knew these weren't his words. They were being given to him just like the music had been given to him.

Saint Gertrude.

She was still helping him and still interceding, still guiding him toward his mission.

He kept writing.

The second verse came with clear images: the isolation, the self-harm, the desire to run away from everything. But also, the truth, that Jesus understood that pain. That Jesus had bled too. That Jesus loved them just the same.

They think that they're the only one. They want to pack their bags and run. They wanna get away, want to leave this life today. They see their cuts and how they bleed, no one knows what they really need. But Jesus felt the pain, so he loves them just the same. The same.

The chorus repeated, and then came the bridge. This part was different, more urgent, more direct. A call to action.

Gotta look around, got to find them. When you find them, you get behind them. Tell them God's there, no isolation. We got to raise up a brand-new nation.

Eddie stared at the words in his notebook. The message was clear: don't just sing about hope, do something about it. Find the suffering kids. Support them. Tell them they're not alone. Build a community of hope and healing.

A new nation.

He picked up his guitar again and sang through what he'd written, matching the words to the melody he'd been practicing. His voice was rough at first; he wasn't much of a singer, but as he sang, the words and music came together into something that surprised him.

This wasn't just a song.

This was a mission statement. A battle cry. A weapon against the darkness that had tried to destroy him and was still trying to destroy thousands of other kids just like him.

Eddie sang it through three more times, refining the phrasing, making sure every word fit perfectly with the melody. By the time he finished, tears were running down his face.

"Thank you," he whispered into the empty room. "Thank you, Saint Gertrude."

He felt a warmth in his chest, like a gentle confirmation. Like someone was smiling at him from across the veil between heaven and earth.

The song was complete.

Saturday morning, Eddie woke up with a sense of urgency. He had to show Father Benedict. Had to play the song for him. He had to know if what he was feeling, that the song was anointed, that it would save lives, was real or just wishful thinking.

He pulled out his phone and sent a text:

I think I got it. The song. Can I come by?

The reply came within minutes:

2 PM today.

Eddie arrived at Saint Benedict's at 1:55 with his guitar in one hand and his small amp in the other. His backpack held the sheet music, his notebook with the lyrics, and extra cables.

Father Benedict was waiting for him at the chapel entrance, wearing his black clerical shirt and Roman collar from the morning Mass.

"Come in, come in," he said, holding the door open. "I've been praying all morning. I had a feeling today was going to be important."

They climbed the narrow stairs to the choir loft. Eddie set up his amp near the organ console and plugged in his guitar.

"Can you give me an E?" Eddie asked.

Father Benedict moved to the organ and pressed a low E key. The deep bass note rumbled through the choir loft.

Eddie tuned his guitar to it, adjusting each string until they matched the organ's pitch.

"Do you want to see the lyrics first?" Eddie asked.

"No," Father Benedict said, settling into a chair near the organ bench. "I want to experience it the way others will experience it. Music and words together."

Eddie took a deep breath. He positioned his fingers on the fretboard, said a quick silent prayer to Saint Gertrude, and began to play.

The opening notes rang out in the choir loft, amplified just enough to fill the space without overpowering it. The fingerpicking pattern he'd worked out created a rich, layered sound, melody and harmony weaving together in the way the original organ piece had done.

He let the instrumental introduction build for a moment. Then he began to sing:

*Three hundred sixty-five days in a year
Some people think life's not clear
There's no reason to go on
No reason to go on*

His voice was soft at first. He wasn't a trained singer, but the emotion in his delivery made up for any technical shortcomings.

*Pain and sadness consume their minds
They think that their whole life's a lie
But God knows the way
To life, to life*

Then the chorus, stronger now, more confident:

*It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray
It's time for second chances
Don't throw your life away
It's time for second chances if you pray*

Eddie glanced at Father Benedict. The priest's eyes were closed, praying. He continued into the second verse:

*They think that they're the only one
They want to pack their bags and run
They wanna get away, wanna leave this life today*

His fingers moved effortlessly across the strings now, muscle memory taking over as he focused on delivering the message:

*They see their cuts and how they bleed
No one knows what they really need
But Jesus felt the pain
So he loves them just the same
The same*

The chorus again, and Eddie could feel something building in the room. Not just sound, but a presence.

As he approached the bridge, Father Benedict suddenly stood up and moved to the organ. He pulled out several stops and positioned his hands over the keys, waiting.

Eddie sang the bridge:

*Gotta look around, got to find them
When you find them, you get behind them*

And Father Benedict joined in, the organ swelling underneath the guitar, adding depth and power to the simple song:

*Tell them God's there, no isolation
We got to raise up a brand new nation*

The organ and guitar together filled the space. The sound filled every corner of the chapel below. Eddie felt tears running down his face as he sang the final chorus, Father Benedict's organ work turning the message into something that felt less like a song and more like a prophecy:

*It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray
It's time for second chances
Don't throw your life away
It's time for second chances if you pray*

They held the final chord, guitar and organ together. Then, slowly, they let it fade.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Finally, Father Benedict rose from the organ bench, his eyes shining and his hands trembling.

"Eddie," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Eddie, that was..."

He couldn't finish. He walked over to where Eddie sat with his guitar and placed both hands on the young man's shoulders.

"Now I'm certain," he said. "You have to record this so people can hear it. This song is anointed and will save souls."

Eddie felt something break open inside him. All the doubt, all the uncertainty, all the fear that he'd been imagining things or fooling himself, all disappeared in the face of Father Benedict's certainty.

"You really think so?"

"I don't think, Eddie. I *know*." Father Benedict sat down in the chair beside him. "That song didn't come from you. You were the instrument; the source was heaven. Saint Gertrude gave you those words just as surely as she gave you the music."

"How do you know?"

"Because I felt it. When you sang, when we played together, I felt it. The same thing I felt when I played the original organ piece last week, but stronger. More focused." He gestured to Eddie's notebook lying open on the music stand. "Those lyrics, they're not just poetic or emotional. They're prophetic. They're a weapon against the spirit of suicide that's plaguing this generation."

Eddie looked down at his guitar. "So, what do I do now?"

"You record it. Professionally. Not just a home recording on your phone, but a real studio recording. Something that can be distributed widely."

"I don't know how to do that. I don't have money for a studio."

Father Benedict smiled. "God will provide. He always does. You've taken the first step, learning the song, writing the lyrics, and bringing it to me. The next steps will become clear."

"When?"

"When you're ready for them." Father Benedict stood up and walked to the window overlooking the parking lot. "Eddie, do you understand what's happening here? Do you see the bigger picture?"

"I think so. I'm supposed to use this song to help other kids who are suicidal."

"Yes, but it's more than that." Father Benedict turned back to face him. "You're living proof that God can redeem us. Two weeks ago, you were standing in those woods with a bottle of death in your hands. Today, you're sitting here with a song that could save thousands of lives. That's not just redemption, Eddie. That's resurrection."

The word hung in the air between them.

Resurrection.

"The enemy tried to kill you," Father Benedict continued. "He wanted to destroy you before you could fulfill your mission, but God saved you. Now you're going to use your second chance to give other kids theirs. That's the ultimate defeat of the enemy's plans."

Eddie felt it settling on his shoulders. Not a burden exactly, but a responsibility. A calling.

"I'm scared," he admitted.

"Good. If you weren't scared, I'd be worried." Father Benedict smiled. "Fear means you understand what you're being asked to do. But remember what Scripture says: 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you.' God wouldn't give you this mission without also giving you the grace to accomplish it."

"*Spes Nostra Salve*," Eddie said quietly.

"Exactly. Hail Our Hope. That's what this song is about. That's what your mission is about. It's about bringing hope to those who have forgotten what real hope is."

They sat together in the choir loft for another half hour, talking about practical next steps. Father Benedict promised to ask around about recording studios, to reach out to people he knew in Catholic media, and to help however he could. But he also emphasized patience.

"Don't rush this," he said. "The song is finished, yes. But you're still healing. Let God direct the timing."

As Eddie packed up his guitar and amp, he felt different from the way he had just two hours ago. More settled. More certain. Like a piece of a puzzle had clicked into place.

He had a mission.

He had a song.

And he had a saint interceding for him from heaven.

Whatever came next, he was ready.

Chapter 8: The recording

Eddie kept practicing the song.

Every day after school, he'd climb the narrow stairs to his room in the Southie triple-decker, close the door, and spend at least two hours with "Second Chances." The fingerpicking pattern that had seemed impossibly complex when he first saw the music now came naturally. Each note rang clear and true.

The song had changed something in his playing. Learning the intricate fingerpicking arrangement, the way the bass notes walked beneath the melody, how the harmonics chimed like bells at certain moments, had opened up something new on the instrument. It was as if he'd been speaking guitar in simple sentences his whole life, and suddenly he'd discovered poetry.

When he went back to his old repertoire, everything had changed. The blues riffs he'd played a thousand times sounded different. His rock chords rang with new richness. He could hear it in everything, the opening to "Little Wing," the complex runs in "Cliffs of Dover," even the simple three-chord progressions of Johnny Cash songs he'd learned as a kid. Everything he touched now had more depth, more soul.

And his voice, his voice, was changing, too. He'd never considered himself a singer. Just a guitar player who could carry a tune when he had to, who could growl out Stevie Ray Vaughan or muddle through "The Boxer" without embarrassing himself. But singing "Second Chances" every day, pouring his heart into those lyrics Saint Gertrude had somehow passed on to him, had strengthened something in him.

His range was expanding. Notes that would have cracked or wavered a month ago now came out clean and strong. He could feel the difference when he sang, less effort, more connection, as if the song itself was teaching his body how to carry it.

The following week, Eddie decided to take his underground gig more seriously. He'd been playing occasionally at various T stops for months, just showing up with his guitar, playing for an hour or two, making some gas money for Vinny. But if he was going to do this regularly, *he needed to do it right*.

On Monday after school, he took the Red Line downtown to the MBTA offices and applied for a proper busking permit. The woman behind the counter, middle-aged, tired-looking, with reading glasses on a chain around her neck, barely looked up as she slid the application form across to him.

"Fifty dollars," she said. "Valid for one year. You can perform at any T station except during rush hour at Park Street, Downtown Crossing, or Government Center. Keep the permit visible. Don't block foot traffic. Don't use amplification."

Eddie counted out the bills from his wallet, money he'd saved from previous busking sessions and his allowance. She processed the permit, laminated it with a machine that wheezed and clunked, and handed it to him.

"Next."

Eddie looked at the permit as he walked out. His photo, taken right there with a Polaroid camera that looked older than he was, stared back at him above his name and an expiration date one year away. Official. He was actually a street musician now, not just a kid with a guitar.

That evening, he returned to his regular spot at Andrew Station on the Red Line.

He'd had the location down to a science. There was a wide section of platform near the northbound side, just past the turnstiles, where the acoustic properties were perfect. The tile walls created a natural reverb that made his guitar sound huge. And the commuter traffic was steady but not overwhelming; people had time to stop and listen if they wanted to, but they weren't packed in so tight that his music became an annoyance.

Eddie set up his usual way: opened his battered hard-shell case, dropped in a few dollars of his own money to seed it, and clipped his new permit to the case's interior lid so everyone could see it.

People dropped money. Smiled. Nodded. Some regulars recognized him and waved. It was a good night, normal, the kind of busking session he'd had dozens of times before.

But then he played "Second Chances."

The opening fingerpicking pattern rang out across the grimy tile platform, cutting through the ambient rumble of trains and conversations and footsteps. Within the first verse, Eddie noticed the change. People were slowing down. Not just one or two, dozens of them. The hurried river of commuters began to stop and form around him.

They think that they're the only ones, they want to pack their bags and run, they wanna get away, wanna leave this life today.

By the chorus, at least thirty people had stopped completely. They stood in a semicircle, backpacks still on their shoulders, briefcases dangling from tired hands, just... listening. Their faces had that look, people hearing something they desperately needed to hear.

*It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray*

When he finished, there was a few seconds of silence, that pause that musicians dream about, when the last note fades, and no one wants to move. Then applause. Not the polite scattering he usually got, but genuine, sustained applause that echoed off the tile walls.

Bills fluttered into his guitar case. Not just ones. Fives. Tens. Someone dropped a twenty.

"Play it again!" a woman's voice called out.

Eddie smiled and launched into the song a second time. The crowd grew. By the second chorus, he could feel the platform filling up. He could hear the approaching rumble of a Red Line train, but people weren't moving toward it. They were staying. Missing their trains to listen.

When he finished the second performance, there was more applause. More money. And more requests: "One more time!" "Please!"

He played it a third time.

Tuesday night, the same thing happened. Eddie worked through his usual songs, adding "Behind Blue Eyes" by The Who and "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd to the rotation, but when he got to "Second Chances," the crowd swelled. Bigger than Monday. Maybe fifty people, packed in tight, some standing on tiptoes to see over others' shoulders.

Wednesday, even larger. The platform was getting crowded now.

Thursday evening, Eddie was halfway through his second performance of "Second Chances" when he saw an MBTA cop approaching through the crowd. His heart sank. This was it; he was going to get shut down, maybe have his permit revoked.

But the cop wasn't angry. He was a big guy, probably in his forties, with the thick Boston accent and the weathered face of someone who'd been working the T for decades. He waited until Eddie finished the song, then approached with his hands relaxed at his sides, not threatening, not aggressive.

The crowd was still applauding. The cop had to raise his voice to be heard.

"Alright, folks, come on, you gotta keep moving." His accent was pure Southie—*gahtta keep movin'*. "Let the kid breathe. You want to listen, listen from over there." He gestured toward the far wall. "But we *gahtta keep* the platform clear. Safety issue."

People dispersed reluctantly, slowly, still calling out "Thank you" and "God bless you" as they moved toward their trains or repositioned themselves along the walls. The cop turned to Eddie.

"You're good, kid. He nodded at the guitar. "But this crowd's getting too big. You see what I'm saying? I got people missing trains, blocking the turnstiles. Someone's gonna get hurt."

"Yes sir," Eddie said quickly. "I understand. I'm sorry."

The cop waved that off. "Nothing to be sorry about. Just... maybe rotate between stations? Don't play the same spot every night. Or come at different times. You got a permit; you're doing everything right. Just *gahitta* manage the crowds better."

"I will. Thank you."

The cop smiled, genuinely smiled. "That last song. The one about second chances. That's something special. My sister... well, never mind. Just keep playing it, okay? People need to hear that."

He walked away before Eddie could respond, into the crowd of commuters heading toward the southbound platform.

Eddie stood there for a moment, his guitar still in his hands. The cop's sister. The way his voice had caught, just for a second, before he'd stopped himself.

The song was reaching people.

He packed up his guitar as he counted the money in his case. Over two hundred dollars from maybe ninety minutes of playing. But it wasn't the money that shook him. It was the faces. The tears. The way that one middle-aged man had stood there for three full performances of the song, tears streaming down his face, not even bothering to wipe them away. The way a teenage girl had mouthed "thank you" to him, hesitant, embarrassed, and not knowing if Eddie could see.

Every time he played "Second Chances," he could feel Saint Gertrude there, somehow, in the spaces between the notes.

Friday evening, Eddie was in his room, running through the song one more time. He wanted to try a slight variation in the bridge, a new harmony to add even more depth, when he heard his father's voice booming from downstairs.

"EDDIE! PHONE!"

He set down his guitar carefully and headed for the stairs, his mind still half on the music. Vinny was standing in the kitchen holding out their clunky Motorola wireless phone, eyebrows raised in a silent question. The phone was so old it had an antenna you had to pull out, so heavy it made your arm tired if you talked too long.

"Some guy," Vinny mouthed, his expression curious. They didn't get many calls on the house line that weren't for Eddie's mother.

He took the phone and headed back upstairs, pushing his bedroom door closed with his foot. He sat on the edge of his bed, suddenly nervous.

"Hello?"

"Eddie, this is Joseph Callahan." A pause, as if the man was gathering himself. "Joe, Evie's father."

The room seemed to heat up. Eddie stifled a cough. He gripped the phone tighter. He remembered Joe Callahan, of course, he did. He'd met him a few times when he'd come over to the Callahans' house to watch movies with Evie. A tall man, probably in his mid-forties, always impeccably dressed even on weekends, pressed khakis, button-down shirts, good shoes. Polite but reserved, a man who'd shake your hand firmly and look you in the eye when asking how school was going. A man who clearly worked hard, who provided well for his family, and who loved his daughter fiercely.

A man whose daughter was dead.

Eddie had been trying not to think about Evie. Every time her face appeared in his mind, along with her laugh, the way she'd toss her hair when she was being sarcastic, and the last time he'd seen her in the car before everything went dark. Now he felt that darkness threatening to return. The whisper. The voice that had driven him into those woods with a plan and a bottle. He was terrified that if he let himself remember her, the voice would return.

"Yes, hello, Mr. Callahan. How are you?"

The words came out automatically, and the instant they left his mouth, Eddie wanted to take them back. *How are you?* What kind of stupid question was that? The man's daughter had killed herself a month ago. How could he possibly be?

But Joe's voice, when it came, was steady. Tired, heavy with grief, Eddie could hear through the phone line.

"I'm getting better," he said. "Still have trouble sleeping. Eddie, I need to see you. Can I pick you up?"

Eddie's heart hammered. Did Joe blame him for something? Had Evie left another note that mentioned Eddie? Did Joe know about that last conversation they'd had when Eddie had been too wrapped up in his own problems to see what Evie was going through? Was he angry? Did he think Eddie could have prevented it?

"Uh... sure. Is everything okay?"

"It's important." Joe's voice was calm, controlled, the voice of a man who'd spent decades making business decisions, negotiating deals, staying composed under pressure. "I know where you live. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

The line went dead.

Eddie sat on his bed, still holding the phone, staring at nothing. His guitar leaned against the wall, the late afternoon sun coming through his window and catching the worn lacquered finish on the maple body.

Twenty minutes.

He stood up, set the phone on his nightstand, and looked at himself in the mirror above his dresser. A scared kid looked back. Dark hair that needed cutting. Eyes that had seen too much in the past few months. The face of someone who'd stood at the edge and somehow stepped back.

He changed into a clean shirt, a dark blue button-down without stains or wrinkles, the one he wore to church on Sundays. He ran his fingers through his hair, then splashed some water on his face in the bathroom down the hall.

Then he went downstairs to wait.

His mother was at the stove, stirring a pot of what smelled like Sunday gravy even though it was Friday. She liked to make big batches on Fridays, let them simmer all weekend to build flavor. The smell of tomatoes, garlic, and basil filled the kitchen.

"Who was on the phone?" she asked without turning around.

"A friend's dad. He's picking me up."

"Will you be home for dinner?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

She turned to look at him then, wooden spoon still in her hand, her mother's radar picking up something in his voice. Her eyes, the same dark brown as his, studied his face.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

She held his gaze for a moment longer, and Eddie could see her deciding whether to push. But something in his expression must have told her not to, because she nodded and turned back to the stove.

"Be careful," she said quietly.

Eddie went to the front window and waited, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Exactly twenty minutes later, Joe Callahan was clearly a man who meant what he said, and Eddie heard it. A low, rumbling drone, a mechanical growl, unmistakable even from a block away. The sound of serious horsepower, serious money, serious intent. It grew louder, deeper, and more visceral until the windows rattled slightly in their frames.

A red Dodge Viper GTS prowled down the street and stopped in front of the house.

Eddie had seen Vipers in magazines, *Car and Driver*, *Motor Trend*, and maybe glimpsed one or two in traffic over the years, always moving fast, always drawing stares, but he'd never been this close to one. It was impossibly low, the roofline barely coming up to his waist. Impossibly wide, taking up almost the entire lane. The red paint, Viper Red, they called it, gleamed in the late afternoon sun like fresh blood. The side exhaust pipes, the aggressive stance, the hood with its subtle power bulge, everything about it screamed performance and danger.

Through the windshield, he could see Joe Callahan looking toward the house. Even from here, Eddie could see the grief on the man's face, new lines that hadn't been there a few months ago.

Eddie grabbed his jacket, his good one, the black canvas one that didn't have any rips or stains. "I'm going out!" he called toward the kitchen, not waiting for a response. He pushed through the front door and walked quickly down the steps, across the small patch of brown grass that passed for their front yard, to the car.

The Viper's door opened with a solid, expensive thunk, not the tinny rattle of the cheap cars Eddie was used to. Eddie slid into the passenger seat and was immediately enveloped in sensations: the smell of Italian leather and subtle cologne, the feel of the sport seat hugging his body, the view through the low windshield that made him feel as if he were sitting on the ground. Everything about the interior screamed luxury and precision: the leather-wrapped steering wheel, the carbon fiber details, the machined aluminum controls.

Joe extended his hand across the center console. Eddie shook it, feeling the firm grip, the calluses that said this was a man who still worked with his hands despite his obvious wealth.

"Good to see you again, Eddie."

Eddie managed to get the words out, even though they felt inadequate. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mister Callahan."

The Viper pulled away from the curb, the engine's rumble deepening as Joe shifted gears. Eddie turned to look out the window, watching his neighborhood slide past, not wanting Joe to see the single tear that had escaped from his right eye, tracking slowly down his cheek.

They drove in silence through the familiar streets of Dorchester. The Viper felt out of place here, too low for the potholes that cratered every street, too wide for the narrow lanes lined with triple-

deckers and corner stores and beat-up Ford Tempos and rusted Camrys. But Joe navigated expertly, his hands relaxed on the wheel despite his grief.

Past Dot Market with its hand-painted signs advertising Mega Millions and Newport cigarettes. Past the Chinese restaurant where Eddie's family sometimes got takeout. Past the park where Eddie had learned to ride a bike, where he'd had his first kiss with a girl whose name he could barely remember now.

They turned onto Morrissey Boulevard, then merged onto the Southeast Expressway heading north toward the city. The Viper's engine settled into a steady, purposeful growl as they accelerated. The sun was setting somewhere behind the buildings to their left, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple and deep blue. Boston's skyline rose ahead of them, the Prudential Center's boxy tower, the financial district's cluster of buildings all competing for height.

The expressway was moderately crowded with Friday evening traffic, people heading into the city for dinner, for shows, for dates. The Viper drew stares from every car they passed. Eddie saw a kid in the back of a minivan point and mouth "Wow!" to his parents. Saw a guy in a BMW try to pace them, then fall back when Joe smoothly changed lanes.

Finally, as they passed the exit for Logan Airport, Joe spoke. His voice was quiet, measured. "I've been going to daily Mass," he said. "At Saint Benedict's Chapel, the little church on M Street."

He paused, and Eddie heard him take a slow, deliberate breath, the kind you take when you're trying to hold yourself together.

"It's helping. Helps me cope with..."

He trailed off. Didn't finish the sentence.

Eddie nodded. The name Benedict Chapel registered somewhere in his mind, but he was too anxious about where they were going and why Joe had called him to make the connection to Father Benedict. All he could focus on was the fear in his stomach, the questions in his head, the grief sitting in the car with them like a third passenger.

They exited the expressway and dove into the tangled streets of downtown Boston. The city closed in around them, buildings instead of sky, noise instead of the highway's steady hum. Joe navigated the maze with practiced ease, turning onto Surface Road, then somehow finding his way into the narrow arteries of the North End without hesitation.

The North End was like another country. The streets here had been laid out in the 1600s, designed for horse carts and foot traffic. The buildings pressed in close on both sides, brick and brownstone, four and five stories tall, with wrought-iron balconies. Laundry hung on lines strung between buildings. Old Italian men sat on stoops, smoking and listening to the Red Sox game on the radio.

The neighborhood smelled of garlic, fresh bread, espresso, and sea salt from the harbor. The sidewalks were crowded with people heading to dinner, tourists consulting maps, and locals who'd lived here for generations.

Joe turned onto a street so narrow that Eddie was sure the Viper's mirrors would scrape the buildings on both sides. Hanover Street, maybe, or one of the even smaller side streets. They stopped in front of a restaurant Eddie had heard his father mention with reverent tones, La Famiglia Gustavo's. A place that required connections to secure a table, where advertising wasn't necessary because of its reputation, and where the same families had been dining for three generations.

There was no parking lot. No visible place to leave a car, let alone one as wide and expensive as a Viper. The street was packed solid with vehicles on both sides, mostly smaller cars that could squeeze into tight spaces. The Viper took up almost the entire street. If another car came, one of them would have to back up.

Before Eddie could wonder what they were going to do, the restaurant's front door, heavy, dark wood with a brass handle, opened, and a man stepped out.

He was maybe fifty, with salt-and-pepper hair combed back, a strong Roman nose, and a face that suggested he'd been handsome in his youth. He wore a suit that Eddie's father would have recognized, Salvatore Ferragamo, probably custom-tailored, the kind of thing that cost three or four thousand dollars. Charcoal gray, with a crisp white shirt and a burgundy tie. But despite the expensive clothes, there was nothing pretentious about him. His movements were easy and graceful, his expression warm.

He walked directly to the driver's side, stepped through a narrow gap between the Viper and a parked Cadillac without hesitation, and opened Joe's door with a smile that reached his eyes.

"Great to see you, Joe."

His voice was pure Boston Italian, not the heavy accent of the old-timers who'd come over on boats, but the mellowed accent of someone born and raised here, who'd never lost touch with the neighborhood.

"Thanks, Paul." Joe climbed out of the low-slung car with practiced ease, unfolding his tall frame from the sport seat. He gestured toward Eddie, still in the passenger seat, trying to process everything. "This is Eddie, a family friend."

Paul came around to Eddie's side, somehow navigating the tight space without getting a speck of dirt on his suit, and opened the door. He extended a hand to help Eddie out, which Eddie needed because getting out of a Viper when you weren't used to it was like trying to climb out of a wet bathtub.

Eddie took his hand, noting the firm grip, the genuine warmth in the man's dark eyes as they shook.

"Great to know you, Eddie."

Paul's smile wasn't the practiced smile of a host trying to impress customers. It was real. Genuine. His eyes were kind, the eyes of someone who'd seen a lot of life, who'd probably heard a thousand stories in this restaurant, who understood that everyone who walked through his door was carrying something.

"Come on in," Paul said, gesturing toward the restaurant's entrance with a graceful sweep of his arm. "We have a quiet table for you both."

Eddie followed Joe and Paul toward the heavy oak door, glancing back once at the Viper sitting in the middle of the narrow street like a red jewel. A couple walking past stopped to stare at it. A kid on a bike slowed down to gawk.

Paul pushed open the door and held it for them. "Don't worry about the car," he said, as if reading Eddie's mind. "Nobody touches anything in front of La Famiglia's. And if they do, they answer to me."

There was no threat in his voice, just a simple statement of fact.

Eddie stepped through the doorway, and the North End disappeared behind him.

Paul materialized at their table, his movements practiced and silent despite the chaos of the Friday night dinner rush beyond their private corner. They could hear the restaurant's pulse, laughter from the main dining room, and the percussion of plates being set down. But here in the back, they had the illusion of solitude.

"Are you ready to order yet?"

Joe looked across the table at Eddie, and what he saw made him pause. The kid looked terrified. His hands were knotted together on the white tablecloth like he was trying to hold himself in one piece. His eyes had that glazed quality of someone bracing for impact, for the blow they knew was coming but couldn't see yet. In the candlelight, Eddie's face was all sharp angles and shadows, making him look even younger than his sixteen years, making him look like what he was, a boy who'd already seen too much darkness.

Joe recognized that look. He'd seen it in the mirror every morning since Evie died.

"I think we'll just have wine for now," Joe said, his voice coming out rougher than he intended. "And maybe some bread."

Paul's expression shifted, just a flicker, but Joe caught it. Understanding. Compassion. The kind of wordless knowing that came from spending decades watching people have conversations that mattered, the ones that changed lives or ended them or somehow managed to do both at once.

"Be right back, Joe."

He disappeared toward the kitchen, leaving them alone. The sounds of La Famiglia Gustavo's drifted back to them, couples in the main room leaning close over flickering candles, families celebrating birthdays with too much wine and not enough restraint, and old men at the bar arguing about the Celtics with the passion usually reserved for theological disputes. But back here, they had privacy. Space.

Joe's heart hammered against his ribs. He'd rehearsed this conversation a dozen times in his head, lying awake at three in the morning in Evie's empty bedroom, sitting in his car in the driveway, unable to remember how he'd gotten home. But now, looking at Eddie's frightened face, all his carefully prepared words evaporated like smoke.

He just had to start. Had to trust that the right words would come.

"Eddie." His voice cracked on the name. He cleared his throat, tried again. "I met Father Benedict. At his chapel, the one in Southie."

Eddie nodded, still silent, still holding himself together with what looked like sheer force of will.

"I'd been going to daily Mass there," Joe continued, and even saying it out loud felt like pulling shrapnel from a wound. "Every morning. Six-thirty. Trying to... I don't know. Trying to find something. Trying to understand."

The words came harder now. Each one felt like lifting something heavy.

"I told him that my daughter Evie had..."

The word wouldn't come. It sat in his throat like broken glass, cutting him every time he tried to force it out. From the main dining room, life continued its symphony of normalcy: forks scraping plates, wine being poured, someone's cell phone ringing to an obnoxious pop song. But at their table, silence stretched and twisted.

"...died."

There it was. The word that had torn his world in half. The word that had turned his beautiful, brilliant, troubled daughter into the past tense, into a memory.

Eddie's face went white. Not pale, white. Like every drop of blood had just drained straight through the floor. His lips parted, but no sound came out. "Father Benedict recognized her name immediately," Joe said, pushing forward before he lost his nerve entirely. "He asked if I knew you."

Eddie blinked. Confusion flickered across his face like lightning behind clouds.

"I explained everything, that you were her friend, that you'd tried to help her. That she'd left a note."

Joe reached for his wine glass, needing something to do with his hands, something to anchor him to this moment before grief overwhelmed him.

The Chianti caught the candlelight and threw it back in fractured ruby patterns across the white tablecloth. Beautiful. Everything was still beautiful, even though Evie was gone. Even though the world had kept spinning when it should have stopped.

"The last thing she wrote..."

His voice broke again. He gripped the wine glass stem so hard it should have shattered.

"The last thing she wrote was 'Tell Eddie I loved him.'"

The sound Eddie made wasn't quite a gasp, wasn't quite a sob. It was something rawer, something that came from a place deeper than words. His whole body jerked as if he'd been shot. His hands flew up to cover his face, pressing against his eyes as if he could physically hold back the tears, hold back the terrible, crushing weight of those six words.

Tell Eddie I loved him.

The same words he had heard from the detective back home. But now it was like hearing them for the first time.

The restaurant noise seemed to fade, or maybe Joe's words narrowed to the sound of Eddie's ragged breathing and the slight tremor in the kid's shoulders as he fought for control.

Joe lifted the wine glass and drained it in two long swallows that burned his throat. He set it carefully on the tablecloth. He folded his hands in front of him and waited, giving Eddie the space to break or not, to hold it together or fall apart, whatever he needed.

When Eddie finally lowered his hands, his eyes were red but dry. His jaw was set with a determination born of making the same choice every day, the choice to keep going, to keep believing that the darkness wasn't the end of the story.

Joe recognized that determination, too. He'd been making the same choice every morning since he found his daughter.

"I told Father Benedict that I wanted to do something," Joe said, and now his voice steadied, found its footing, because this was the part he'd been sure of from the beginning. "Something to help the kids who are running into the same problems as Evie. The kids who are struggling. Who feel like there's no way out."

Eddie nodded slowly, his throat working as he swallowed hard.

"Father Benedict told me about the song you wrote." Joe leaned forward slightly. "About how you needed help getting it recorded."

Eddie's eyes widened. "Eddie, I know people, or, as they say back in Charlestown, I know a guy."

And here it was, the thing Joe was good at, the thing that had made him successful in business, the skill that had built his company and his reputation. Connecting people. Making things happen and turning ideas into reality.

"Lots of people in lots of different businesses. And here's my idea."

He paused, watching Eddie's face, seeing the kid's entire world shift and realign around what was about to come next.

"I know a guy who's connected with a major record label. His name is Morris Stone."

Recognition flared in Eddie's eyes like a match striking in darkness.

"He produced hundreds of millions in the music business, mostly with 'Boy Bands' and other acts from Boston. Big names. Real talent."

Eddie's hands unclenched on the tablecloth. He was leaning forward now.

"I spoke to him yesterday. I told him about you, about the song, about what we're trying to do, using music to reach kids who are hurting and need to know they're not isolated." Joe allowed himself a small smile, the first genuine one he'd managed in weeks. "Turns out he already knows you."

The confusion that washed over Eddie's face would have been comical under different circumstances.

"What? How?"

"The CANTAB LOUNGE," Joe said. "In Cambridge. Morris goes there sometimes to look for talent, watching the open-mic nights. He's seen you perform, Eddie. Multiple times."

Eddie looked absolutely stunned. His mouth opened and closed. His hands spread flat on the tablecloth like he needed to feel something solid.

"I... I had no idea. There were always so many people there, it was so crowded, I never—"

"He said you need to work on your singing," Joe interrupted, because honesty mattered here. After all, Eddie needed the truth, not flattery. "But your guitar playing, Eddie..."

Joe leaned forward, holding the kid's gaze.

"He said your guitar playing stands out from everyone else in Boston. Everyone. He said you could hold your own with the greats from Chicago."

The words hung in the air between them like something physical.

The distant sounds of the restaurant continued: the clink of silverware. But at their table, something else was happening. Something that felt less like a coincidence and more like a design. Less like luck and more like a plan from heaven.

Eddie's face transformed. The fear drained away, replaced by something else, wonder, maybe. Or recognition. Like a man stumbling through darkness who suddenly sees light bleeding through cracks in the wall and realizes the darkness isn't a prison. It's just the space between where he is and where he's supposed to be.

This was what Father Benedict had told him, what the priest had promised with such unshakeable certainty that Eddie had almost believed it, despite his doubt.

God will set things up for you when the time is right. Don't try to rush it. Don't try to force it. Trust the timing. Your job is to stay faithful. His job is everything else.

And here it was, the setup. The divine orchestration that Eddie's rational mind wanted to dismiss as coincidence, but his soul recognized as something else entirely. Morris Stone, the Morris Stone who'd formed some of Boston's biggest bands, had been watching him. Had been evaluating him and, apparently, had seen something worth investing in.

And Joe, Evie's father, carrying a grief so massive it should have crushed him, was here, offering to connect them and help bring the song to life. The song that was supposed to help kids like Evie, kids drowning in darkness who needed someone to throw them a rope.

Paul appeared again, moving quietly through the back area with a different bottle of wine cradled in his hands like something precious. This one was older, dustier, and more expensive based on the faded label and the reverent way Paul handled it. He set it down without a word, filled both their glasses with the practiced efficiency of a man who understood that sometimes silence was the greatest gift you could offer, and then left them alone again.

The wine was darker than the first bottle. Richer. It caught the candlelight and seemed to hold it, to burn from within like garnet transformed into liquid.

Eddie stared at his glass, barely touched. At sixteen, he probably shouldn't be drinking wine at all, but Joe had poured it anyway, and somehow in this moment it felt less like breaking rules and more like sharing a secret. His breath was coming faster.

This was his sign. His answer. Everything Saint Gertrude had written on that manuscript, everything he'd been praying for while lying awake at night, wondering if God was even listening, it was all coming together right here, right now, in a North End restaurant.

But then the fear came.

It started small, just a whisper in the back of his mind. *You're not ready.* Then it grew louder, more insistent, until it was practically screaming. *You need more time. Your singing isn't good enough. Your voice cracks on the high notes. You rush the tempo when you're nervous. You're going to mess this up. You're going to let Evie down. You're going to let all those hurting kids down. You're going to prove that you're exactly what you've always suspected, not good enough, not talented enough.*

The old familiar spiral. The voice that had driven him to those woods with a bottle of pills in his bag. The voice that told him he was broken beyond repair.

Joe was watching him carefully, reading the emotions flickering across his face like text on a page. The man had spent sixteen years learning to decode his daughter's moods, learning to spot the signs of trouble before they bloomed into a crisis. He recognized the look in Eddie's eyes because he'd seen it in Evie's a hundred times.

"Can we meet Morris at my house tomorrow night?" Joe asked quietly.

Tomorrow night.

Twenty-four hours away.

Eddie's mind raced. He needed more time. Needed to practice the song until his fingers bled. Needed to work on his breathing, his phrasing, his pitch. Needed to transform himself from the nervous kid who played open mics at the CANTAB into someone worthy of Morris Stone's attention. Needed to become someone better, someone stronger, someone who wouldn't fail.

The panic rose in his throat like flood water, cold and choking.

But then—

No.

The word came from somewhere deeper than thought. From the same place that had made him stop in those woods. From the same place that had walked him into Father Benedict's chapel on a freezing December afternoon.

This was exactly what Father Benedict had warned him about. The temptation to control everything. To make himself ready instead of trusting that God would make him ready. To earn grace through effort rather than accept it as coming from the hands of God.

Eddie took a slow breath. Made a conscious choice.

He could let the fear win, let it convince him to ask for more time, to postpone the meeting, to practice until he felt ready, which would probably be never because fear always moved the goalposts, always found new reasons why he wasn't good enough yet.

Or he could trust.

Trust that if this were happening now, if Morris Stone somehow already knew who he was and wanted to meet tomorrow, then this was God's timing. This was His plan. This was the divine setup Father Benedict had promised. This was the answer to every desperate prayer he'd whispered in the darkness.

He looked at Joe and saw the grief etched on his face, like words carved in stone. He noticed the new lines around his eyes and the gray hair at his temples, likely appearing overnight the day the police arrived. The desperate, fierce hope was evident in his expression—a desire to transform his daughter's death into a meaningful purpose, to turn her tragedy into a mission, and to prevent other children from suffering the same fate.

How could Eddie let his own fear stand in the way of that? How could he let his insecurity block what God was so clearly orchestrating? How could he choose self-doubt over trust when trust and confidence were the one thing, the most important thing, that Saint Gertrude had taught him in her book?

Confidence in God's mercy, she'd said. Childlike trust defeats despair.

Eddie met Joe's eyes and held them.

"If this idea will help the teens," he said, and his voice was steady despite the fear still churning in his gut, despite the voice still screaming that he wasn't ready, "then I'm all for it."

He paused, let the certainty settle into his bones, and let confidence replace the fear.

"This is what I've been waiting for."

The words felt true the instant he spoke them. Not just true, but sacred. Like a vow. Like a promise. Like stepping off a cliff and finding the air itself would hold him.

Joe's face transformed. The grief was still there; it would always be there. Eddie understood that now, but something else bloomed alongside it. Relief. Hope. The first genuine light Eddie had seen in the man's eyes since they'd sat down.

"Tomorrow night then," Joe said, and reached across the table to grip Eddie's hand. His palm was warm, his grip firm. A father's hand. A businessman's hand. A hand that had clutched his dying daughter and somehow gathered the strength to release her.

"Tomorrow night," Eddie agreed.

The sounds of the restaurant continued around them, plates clattering, wine flowing, laughter rising and falling like waves. But at their private table in the back, something else was happening. Two people bound together by grief, hope, and a dead girl's last words. That every prayer whispered in desperation was heard and answered, even if the answer came in ways too strange and perfect to be anything but divine.

"Eddie, I want to thank you."

Eddie blinked. "For what?"

Joe's voice was thick with emotion, but steady. "For showing respect to my daughter. The reason I liked you from the beginning was that Evie told me you always respected her and were a gentleman. You never tried to..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "...take advantage of her like other boys had tried to do."

Eddie knew exactly what he was talking about, but didn't say more. He'd cared about Evie, cared about her soul, and never wanted to hurt her in any way. The thought of doing otherwise had never even crossed his mind.

"I loved Evie," Eddie said quietly. "And I pray for her soul."

Joe cleared his throat. "Eddie, one more thing..."

Eddie looked up.

"Bring your guitar tomorrow when we meet Morris."

Understanding dawned on Eddie's face. "That's right, he'll want me to play the song for him."

Joe nodded. "He'll want to hear it, and as he said, to see what we're working with."

Eddie felt his heart rate tick up again, but this time the fear was different. Not the paralyzing terror of inadequacy, but the sharp, bright nervousness of getting started. Of prayers being answered in ways too strange to explain.

"I'll bring it," Eddie said. Just like that, it was settled.

Chapter 9: Final revision

At 7 PM, Eddie and Tom were chatting in the living room when the doorbell rang. Eddie felt that familiar nervousness. Tom opened the door, and Morris Stone entered. He was a tall Black man with slightly graying temples and a commanding yet effortless posture. He wore a tailored suit that subtly signaled wealth.

Eddie stood to shake his hand, praying his palm wasn't sweaty.

Morris was from down south and had a friendly demeanor that put Eddie slightly at ease. He looked at Eddie's guitar case and cut straight to business. "What do you have for songs?"

Eddie looked at Morris and made a split-second decision; he'd show him the original sheet music and see what happened. He knew Morris was a brilliant musician who had written dozens of hit songs, more than a few hit number one.

Eddie opened his guitar case and handed the original sheet music to Morris. He was a keyboard player, so Eddie figured he could read it.

Morris studied it for a long moment, then looked up. "Who wrote this?"

Eddie said one word. "God."

Morris was a Southern Baptist who had stopped attending church many years earlier. Something flickered across his face, recognition, maybe. Or a memory. "You know, kid, I believe you. Let me hear it."

Tom excused himself, saying he had to make some calls, and left the room.

Morris removed his suit jacket, draped it carefully over the arm of the couch, and sat down. Eddie did a quick tune-up on the guitar and flicked on the Pignose amp.

Morris gestured toward the case. "I caught your set at the Cantab. You still got that Strat?"

"Yeah."

"I know it's not vintage, but I remember it having a great tone."

"Thanks. I try to get that sound I hear in my head. Sometimes I do."

Eddie started to play the intro he had come up with. Morris held the sheet music, following along. Eddie began the first verse.

*Three hundred sixty-five days in a year
Some people think life's not clear*

*There's no reason to go on
No reason to go on*

*Pain and sadness consume their minds
They think that their whole life's a lie
But God knows the way
To life, to life*

Morris stood up abruptly and held up his hand.

Eddie's stomach sank as he feared the worst: that Morris hated it.

"Eddie, what happened to your voice?" Morris shook his head, almost laughing. "I don't remember it sounding like that at the Cantab. It's a lot more professional now. You've got your own sound, just like that guitar." He waved his hand. "Sorry to stop you. Keep going."

Relief washed over Eddie. He sang the last part of the verse and continued.

*It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray
It's time for second chances
Don't throw your life away
It's time for second chances if you pray*

*They think that they're the only one
They want to pack their bags and run
They wanna get away, want to leave this life today*

Then Eddie went to the bridge and stayed there, locked into a hypnotic groove. Morris walked over to the piano without a word. He started adding chord progressions that made the song even better, if that was possible. Morris knew what people liked. All those hit songs under his belt, he just knew.

Tom came back into the room and froze in the doorway, mesmerized by what he heard. This was better than he ever could have hoped for.

They stayed on the bridge, and Morris began singing harmony and background parts, his voice weaving through Eddie's.

*Gotta look around, gotta find them
When you find them, you get behind them*

The music built. Eddie kept the rhythm going, over and over. More intricate runs on the piano, beautiful harmonies layering on top of the lead.

Then something changed.

Morris's hands slowed on the keys. He kept playing, but his head dropped. His shoulders curved inward. Eddie could see his lips moving, silent words that looked like he was praying.

Morris had a sister once. She was thirty-three. He lost her to suicide fifteen years ago. The note said she couldn't take the pain anymore. Morris had spent every day since wondering if he could have done something different, said something different, or been there more.

The bridge kept repeating. *Gotta look around, got to find them
When you find them, you get behind them*

Eddie watched Morris lift his head slowly. Tears streamed down his face, but his hands found the keys again with renewed purpose. The chord progressions became richer, more urgent. This wasn't just music anymore.

This was a pointing sign.

Morris had asked God for years whether what he was doing mattered. Whether his success meant anything. Why did he survive when his sister didn't. And here, in Tom Callahan's living room, with a sixteen-year-old kid who said God wrote the music, Morris got his answer.

*Tell them God's there, no isolation
We got to raise up a brand-new nation*

Morris's voice joined Eddie's again, stronger now. "Chorus! Four, three, two, one—"

Morris raised his hand high, directing now, conducting. Then he gave a sharp cutting gesture.

Eddie was right there with him and ended it on a downbeat, letting his guitar ring out.

Morris actually jumped, and when his feet hit the floor, they cut the song off together.

Dead silence.

Morris stood there, motionless, his hands still hovering over the keys. Then he turned to face Eddie, no shame in the tears that streamed from his eyes.

"I had a sister," Morris said quietly. "Lost her to suicide." His voice caught. "And I've been asking God ever since if any of this—" he gestured around, meaning his career, his success, everything "—if any of it matters and what my purpose is."

He took a breath, composing himself.

"I don't know what else to say..."

The silence stretched between them.

"Except that song is anointed." Morris's eyes locked on Eddie's. "And I will help you get it out there."

Tom broke the silence. "So, what's the plan, Morris?"

Morris turned to Eddie. "First thing, you need to define your audience clearly."

Eddie looked at Tom. "Does he know about Evie? What the song is really for?"

Tom's voice went quiet. "He knows we lost Evie to..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

Morris nodded slowly. "Now I understand what this song is for and how I can help." He pulled a chair closer to Eddie. "So tell me, who's your audience?"

Eddie had done his research. "Suicide rates are going up everywhere, but the sharpest increase is kids ten to fourteen. It's climbing for every age group, but young people are getting hit the hardest."

Morris leaned back, thinking. "So, this song needs to reach almost everyone, it sounds like. My sister was thirty-three when we lost her." He paused, then picked up momentum. "What you have right now doesn't need much work. The beat is solid. The hook is catchy. People will remember it, and on top of all that technical stuff..." He pointed at Eddie. "It's anointed. I felt something when we played it. It felt better than hearing my first number one song on the radio."

He stood up, pacing now. "That song made me a lot of money. But this..." He shook his head. "There's no amount of money that can buy a soul. And I know, sure as I'm standing here, that this song can and will save souls."

Morris stopped pacing and faced Eddie directly. "Tell you what. Whatever you're doing to strengthen your voice, keep doing it."

"I've just been playing in the subway," Eddie said.

Morris laughed, a genuine, surprised laugh. "You know what? I used to do that too, back in the day." He grinned. "You keep at it. I was thinking we might need to get some big-name singer to record your song, but now..." He studied Eddie carefully. "Now I know you're the one who needs to sing it."

Morris's mind was clearly racing, making plans. "I know exactly what arrangement this needs. And I can get the best session musicians on the East Coast to play on it." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I have a private studio that nobody knows about. I've tracked seven number one songs there. This is going to be fun."

Eddie's stomach turned. "But what if the record label doesn't like it? What if they don't want to promote it?"

Morris didn't hesitate. "If that happens, I'll do it with an independent company I know. I'm willing to take a chance on this song." He looked Eddie square in the eye. "It's all about airplay. I have a good reputation with radio DJs across the country. They know I only bring them great songs, songs that people actually want to hear. Eddie, have confidence."

Confidence.

That was the word Eddie needed to hear. His mind flashed to St. Gertrude, who'd written that we must have confidence in our prayers to God. Now here was Morris Stone, a man who'd written all those hits, saying the same thing.

Morris grabbed his suit jacket from the couch and put it on, smoothing the lapels. "Let me call you in a few days after I get everything set up."

Tom stood. "Morris, I don't know how to thank you."

Morris held up his hand. "Don't thank me. I've been praying for a project like this ever since my sister..." His voice trailed off.

He paused at the door, his hand on the knob. "You know, this isn't exactly the best career move for me, producing this song. The investors at the label are always focused on the bottom line. This won't make the kind of money they expect from a Morris Stone production." He smiled, but there was something deeper beneath it. "Maybe it's time I gave back for all that God has done for me. Even after I'd turned my back on Him."

Morris opened the door, then looked back one more time. "Eddie, get ready. We're going to do something important here."

And with that, Morris Stone walked out into the night.

Chapter 10: The Band

Morris started working on the charts for the rhythm section the next day. He knew exactly which musicians he wanted to record this song. Three of them were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The bass player and drummer he had made rich because he used them on every song that went platinum.

Rico Simms was his best friend from his hometown in Florida. Morris had convinced him to come to Boston years earlier, promising steady work, even though there were no hits at first, just club gigs at the mob clubs in Roxbury.

The worst was a place called Nicky's Lounge, a front for selling drugs and stolen guns. The dance floor was permanently sticky because drunken dancers spilled their drinks every night, and nobody ever really cleaned it up. Morris spent half his breaks helping people too drunk to stand get into cabs, always paying the fare himself out of his own pocket.

When business was slow, Morris would see the owner and bartender huddled at the end of the bar, talking in low voices. He knew exactly what that conversation was about. Always blame the band when things were slow. Never mind that the place was a dump. Never mind trying to hire employees who weren't rude to the customers. Just blame the band.

More than once, Nicky called Morris out back and told him to fire certain guys in the band because he didn't think they were good musicians. Morris always talked him out of it. "The place will be packed next week," he'd say. "I'm setting up a talent show."

And that's exactly what happened. So packed that there were fire-code violations due to too many people crammed inside. Nicky smoothed it over with a hundred-dollar bill for the cop who brought the violation notice, complimentary drinks and dinner in the back room, and his best-looking waitress to serve him.

Through all of it, Rico believed Morris when he kept saying, "I got a song that's going to go to the top."

Those songs in the old days never went anywhere. But it created a bond between them that lasted, because Rico trusted Morris when everyone else thought he was crazy. Rico stood on that sticky dance floor night after night, playing his bass for drunks and dealers, because Morris said something big was coming.

And then the hits came. So many that they lost count. So much money that Rico needed an accountant and a lawyer to chase down royalties from every country on earth.

Morris picked up the phone and dialed.

"Rico, I need you to record something for me."

"What is it?"

"This is a very different project. Like nothing I've ever produced before."

"What do you mean by different?"

Morris took a breath. "It's a song about suicide."

Silence on the other end.

"You still there, Rico?"

"I'm here." Rico's voice was quiet. "I've never heard something like that on the radio."

"I know. I've been getting pushback about it already. People in the business are telling me it's a career killer." Morris could hear the doubt creeping into his own voice. "Things like, it's too depressing, no one wants to hear it, especially with the holidays coming up. I started to doubt it myself, but..."

"But what?"

"I have people close to me who have done that." Morris paused. "You know, they ended things."

Rico was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. Same here. Now that I think about it, I know three people who've had it happen to close relatives."

"Exactly." "It's so widespread now, but it's kept hidden because of the stigma attached. That's why I'm not going to let anything stop me from producing this song." "I have a good feeling about this one."

"I'm off until New Year's," Rico said without hesitation. "Count me in."

Morris smiled, just like the old days at Nicky's. Rico never questioned him. Morris said, "Who's your first pick for drummer?"

"Oh, that's easy, Pete Sterling. He and I were born in the same pocket, like baby kangaroos."

"I already wrote out charts for bass and drums," Morris said, "and I already wrote both your names at the top. Best rhythm section in the world, and we're going to do something big with this song."

"When?"

"Next Saturday. One PM. The studio in the woods."

Morris didn't have to say the name of the studio. It was the one he always used now to track what he thought were going to be big hits. Rico knew exactly where he meant. Morris bought a

majority of the studio two years ago and brought in the best recording gear that money could buy.

"See you then," Rico said.

Morris hung up the phone and stared at the charts spread across his desk. They'd come a long way from that sticky dance floor at Nicky's. The record execs would hate this song. The label would probably fight him. But for the first time in twenty years, he felt like he was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing.

Tom Callahan pulled up in front of Eddie's house Saturday morning in the Viper. Eddie was struggling with his guitar case, trying to angle it into the cramped back seat without banging it against the windows.

"We need to move," Tom called through the open window. "Morris wants you there early to go over the arrangement."

Eddie finally wedged the case in and slid into the passenger seat. Two minutes later, they were merging onto the Mass Pike, heading toward Providence. The Viper's engine roared beneath them, but Eddie barely heard it. His mind kept running through the chord changes, the lyrics, wondering if he'd remember everything when the recording started.

At 11 AM, they turned off onto a dirt road marked only by a small wooden sign. The road wound through dense woods for half a mile before opening up at the studio.

He'd never seen anything like it, not even in **MUSICIAN** magazine. A massive two-floor complex sat at the edge of a private pond, with huge bay windows on the upper level that reflected the water. A long wooden pier stretched out into the pond, perfectly still in the morning light.

"You could fish off that thing," Eddie said quietly. "Or swim in the summer."

Tom smiled. "I've seen Morris out there. Says it clears his head between takes."

Morris emerged from the studio entrance as they parked. Eddie noticed immediately that Morris looked tense. His smile was tight, his movements quick and purposeful. Not what Eddie wanted to see, given his own nerves. He'd been hoping for calm, for reassurance. Instead, everything felt charged with urgency.

"We need to hurry and get you set up," Morris said, already heading back toward the door. "The rhythm section will be here soon, and I want to go over—"

"I need a few minutes to pray," Eddie said.

Morris stopped. Turned. For a moment, he looked like he might object. Then something softened in his face.

"Yeah. Okay."

Eddie walked past him, down the sloping lawn to the pier. His footsteps echoed on the wooden planks as he made his way to the end. The water was dark and smooth as glass. He bowed his head.

The prayer from St. Gertrude came back to him, the one from the booklet his grandmother left him. He could see the page in his mind, almost feel the thin paper between his fingers. The words came quietly:

"O Jesus, what would I add to these prayers? Certainly nothing but this: Thy will be done."

He let the words settle. All the worry about the recording, about whether he was good enough, whether the song would work, it all had to go to God. There was nothing else he could do.

I truly have the good will but not the power to fulfill all the joys of confidence..."

Eddie opened his eyes and stared out at the water. He didn't have the power. That was the truth. But maybe that was okay. Maybe that's exactly where God wanted him.

He walked back up the pier. Morris was standing near the studio entrance, his head also bowed, lips moving silently. Eddie waited until he looked up.

"You know, Eddie," Morris said, his voice different now, quieter, more vulnerable, "I'm glad you did that. You reminded me that this song is more than just a recording to make a buck." He paused, looking out at the pond. "It's something that can save lives. And more importantly, can save souls."

Morris ran a hand through his hair. "I forgot to pray this morning. I started praying again yesterday, after twenty years of forgetting about God. Twenty years. But this morning, out of habit, I just... forgot. Got up, made coffee, started thinking about mic placement and EQ settings." He met Eddie's eyes. "Thank you for reminding me what we're really doing here."

"I almost forgot too. If we don't pray, then we're doing this in the flesh. And it'll probably be a disaster, and it could also be dangerous."

"Exactly." Morris clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you set up."

Inside, the studio was even more impressive. The control room sat behind thick glass, filled with a massive SSL mixing console that looked like the cockpit of a spaceship. Morris led him

through to the tracking room, a huge open space with hardwood floors, acoustic panels on the walls, and more vintage equipment than Eddie had ever seen in one place.

A man in his fifties with silver hair and wire-rimmed glasses approached, extending his hand.

"Eddie, this is Bob Mountain," Morris said.

Eddie's eyes widened. He'd read about Bob Mountain in 'recording' magazine just last month. The engineer had just been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for recording the most number-one hits in history. And now he was shaking Eddie's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Eddie," Bob said warmly. "Morris says good things about you."

"Same to you, Bob." Eddie's voice came out quieter than he intended. "I mean, it's an honor."

Bob smiled. "Let's make something great today. Head over to that wall of amps and pick out two, one for clean tones and one for lead."

He walked slowly across the room, his sneakers squeaking slightly on the polished floor. When he reached the amp wall, he stopped and stared. There had to be thirty amplifiers, all wired together with a switching system. Vintage Fenders, Marshalls, Vox's, and models he'd never even heard of.

His eyes settled on a cream-colored amp with simple black lettering: Dumble Overdrive Special. He'd read about these; Stevie Ray Vaughn made them famous. The greatest guitarists in the world waited years to get one. The tone was legendary, thick, creamy, sustaining forever.

For clean, he chose a 1963 Fender Vibroverb, one of the holy grail Fender combos from the early reverb era.

"Good choices," Bob said, nodding approvingly. He moved a tall microphone stand in front of where Eddie would stand. "This is a vintage Neumann U67. Great vocal mic."

Morris appeared beside them. "That mic's recorded seven No. 1 hits."

Eddie swallowed hard. The pressure was suddenly real again, crushing down on his shoulders. Maybe he should go back out to the pier. Say another prayer. Make sure—

No. He'd prayed. God heard him. This was out of his hands now.

But his palms were damp as he opened his guitar case.

"We usually overdub lead vocals after we get the music tracks down," Morris explained, watching Eddie connect his guitar cable. "But sometimes, not often, but sometimes, we get a live vocal take that ends up being the keeper. Lightning in a bottle, you know?" He stepped closer. "I

want you to play and sing just like you're at Andrew Station during rush hour. Same feeling. Same heart."

Eddie looked up, his mouth dry. "I'll try."

"Eddie." Morris's voice was firm but kind. "Relax. Let me do the worrying."

Eddie looked up and saw both Morris and Bob smiling at him, not forced smiles, but real ones. Warm. Encouraging.

He took a breath and plugged in his guitar.

Bob worked quickly, adjusting levels, setting tone and volume on both amps. "Give me a few bars of something."

Eddie played the opening progression of the song. The sound that came through those amplifiers was like nothing he'd ever heard from his guitar. Rich, full, every note clear and present. The clean tone sparkled. The overdrive sang.

"That's it," Bob said from the control room, his voice coming through the talkback speaker. "That's your sound right there."

Eddie played it again, feeling it this time instead of just hearing it. The tension in his shoulders started to ease.

Maybe this was going to be okay after all.

Chapter 11: The First Take

The rhythm section arrived in two cars just after noon.

Rico arrived first, retrieving his bass from a well-used case that had been through countless sessions. He appeared older than Eddie anticipated, probably around fifty, with graying hair tied back in a ponytail and the composed, deliberate motions of someone used to this routine.

"Eddie, right?" Rico extended his hand. "Morris played me the demo. Beautiful song, man."

"Thanks," Eddie managed, shaking his hand. Rico's grip was firm, confident. Everything Eddie wasn't feeling.

The drummer came next, Pete, a compact guy with forearms like a weight lifter and a quiet intensity that filled the room. He nodded to Eddie, then immediately started adjusting his kit with the precision of a watchmaker.

Last through the door was Jimmy, the rhythm guitarist Morris had called in to fill out the sound. He looked like he'd stepped off a Stones album cover, thin, weathered, with a vintage Telecaster slung over his shoulder.

"Gentlemen," Morris announced from behind his keyboard setup, "this is Eddie Marcello. He wrote this song, and he's going to sing it. Our job is to support him and make him sound like the star he is."

Eddie felt his face flush. Star. He was standing in a room with session players who'd recorded hits he'd heard on the radio his entire life, and Morris was calling *him* the star.

They spent twenty minutes getting sounds. Bob moved between the control room and the tracking floor, placing mics, adjusting headphone mixes, and making small tweaks that Eddie couldn't hear but apparently mattered. Morris played through the changes on the keyboard, explaining the dynamics, the build, and where the song needed to breathe.

"It's simple," Morris said, running through the progression again. "But simple doesn't mean easy. We need to feel every note. This isn't background music. This is about hope. About getting one more chance at life."

Eddie watched Rico nod, his fingers already finding the bass line. Pete was tapping out the rhythm on his knee, internalizing the pulse. Jimmy strummed softly, finding his place in the arrangement.

They ran through it once. Just a rough pass, Morris calling out changes, everyone finding their parts. The sound was huge, nothing like Eddie's demo, nothing like playing solo at Andrew Station. The bass gave it depth, the drums drove it forward, Jimmy's rhythm guitar filled the spaces Eddie's fingerpicking left open.

But it felt mechanical. Technical. Right notes, right rhythm, but something was missing.

"Good," Morris said when they finished. He turned to Bob in the control room. "We ready?"

Bob's voice came through the talkback speaker. "Ready when you are."

Morris looked at Eddie. "You good?"

His hands felt cold despite the warmth of the studio. "I think so."

"Don't think. Feel." Morris settled his hands on the keyboard. "Remember where you got this song and who it's for."

Eddie nodded and stepped up to the microphone. The headphones felt heavy on his ears. Through the control room glass, he could see Bob adjusting levels on the console, his silver hair catching the light from the meters.

"Let's roll one," Morris said casually. "Just to get a level on Eddie's vocal."

Pete counted it off with his sticks. Four clicks, then Morris's keyboard came in with those opening chords that Eddie had heard in his mind that first night, the ones that had pulled him out of sleep and into something bigger than life.

Eddie's fingers found the opening fingerpicking pattern. His guitar blended with Morris's keyboard, creating a texture.

He closed his eyes, waiting for his vocal entrance.

And suddenly, he wasn't in the studio anymore.

He was at Andrew Station on a Friday afternoon. The smell of electricity from the third rail and coffee. The rumble of an approaching train. The endless river of people flowed past him, around him, through him, as if he didn't exist.

His fingers kept playing. Muscle memory. The pattern he'd played a hundred times.

Then he saw the man.

Layers of worn clothing. Graying beard. Eyes that had seen too much hardness. Standing perfectly still while everyone else rushed past, listening like Eddie's guitar was the only sound in the world.

Eddie's voice came in, and he sang the first verse from that place, from Andrew Station, from the memory, from the moment he'd understood what the song was really about.

"Three hundred sixty-five days in a year, some people think life's not clear..."

He saw the tears streaming down the old man's weathered face. The way he'd stood transfixed, like the melody was reaching inside him and touching something that had been buried for years.

"There's no reason to go on, no reason to go on..."

The band swelled behind him. Rico's bass line locked with Pete's kick drum, driving forward but never rushing. Jimmy's rhythm guitar added color and movement. Morris's keyboard soared above it all, carrying the melody when Eddie's voice dropped.

"Pain and sadness consume their minds, they think that their whole life's a lie..."

Eddie kept his eyes closed. Kept seeing the old man, and feeling that moment when a trembling hand had reached into a pocket and pulled out a dime.

A single dime.

Everything he had.

"But God knows the way, to life, to life..."

The chorus hit, and Eddie's voice broke open. Not from technique. Not from trying to sound a certain way. From remembering what it felt like to watch that man drop his last ten cents into a guitar case because the music had given him something he desperately needed.

Hope.

Proof that beauty still existed.

Evidence that God hadn't forgotten him.

"It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way..."

The band was locked in now, playing with a unity that transcended the fact that they'd just met. Morris's keyboard danced between the chord changes. Rico's bass notes were perfectly placed, each one supporting the vocal. Pete's drums built and released tension with the instinct of a storyteller.

"It's time for second chances if you pray..."

Eddie saw himself shrugging out of his leather jacket. The ripped one, broken in just right. His favorite. Catching up to the old man and holding it out. The man's red eyes, full of tears. The weight of the jacket in trembling hands.

"It's time for second chances, don't throw your life away..."

Into the second verse, Eddie's voice carried the weight of everyone he'd ever seen at Andrew Station. The businessman with dead eyes. The college girl with scars on her wrists. The mother, clutching her child, exhausted beyond measure.

"They think that they're the only one, they want to pack their bags and run..."

The melody climbed. Morris added swells on the keyboard. Jimmy's guitar shimmered.

"They wanna get away, want to leave this life today..."

"They see their cuts and how they bleed, but Jesus felt the pain..."

His voice cracked slightly, raw with emotion.

"So he loves them just the same. The same."

The second chorus rang out, the full band hitting every accent, every dynamic shift. Then they pulled back for the bridge—just bass and drums holding the groove while Eddie's guitar picked out a new pattern.

Morris's voice came in strong on the bridge, singing harmony with Eddie:

"Gotta look around, got to find them, when you find them, you get behind them..."

The energy built. Pete's drums opened up. Jimmy's guitar added rhythmic stabs.

"Tell them God's there, no isolation, we got to raise up, a brand-new nation..."

The final chorus exploded, everyone playing full out now, the sound huge and triumphant. Eddie's voice soared over the top, not holding back, not protecting himself, just giving everything he had.

"It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way..."

"It's time for second chances if you pray..."

"It's time for second chances, don't throw your life away..."

"It's time for second chances if you pray, I said pray..."

The bridge came back, even bigger this time:

"Gotta look around, got to find them, when you find them, you get behind them..."

"Tell them God's there, no isolation, we got to raise up, a brand-new nation..."

Then the outro, the band pulling back again, just Eddie's guitar and Morris's keyboard, the sound fading.

Eddie let the last chord ring, his fingers holding the strings until the sound disappeared completely into silence.

He opened his eyes.

Morris had stopped playing. Rico's hands were still on his bass, but frozen. Pete sat motionless behind his drums, sticks held loosely. Jimmy was staring at the floor, his Telecaster silent.

Through the control room glass, Eddie saw Bob lean back in his chair and take off his headphones. Morris stood from the keyboard, but he didn't say anything. He just walked into the control room.

Eddie pulled off his headphones. His heart was pounding. Had he messed something up? Missed a cue? Sung off-key?

Morris and Bob were talking, but the talkback speaker was off. Eddie could see their mouths moving, see Bob pointing at something on the console, see Morris nodding. They both put on headphones.

They were listening to the playback.

Eddie's fear rose. They were checking to see what went wrong. This was it, they'd tell him it was a good effort, but they needed to do it again. Maybe bring in a real singer, someone who actually knew what they were doing in a professional studio.

Rico caught his eye and smiled slightly, but didn't say anything. The other players looked relaxed, but Eddie couldn't shake the feeling that he'd blown it.

Morris pressed the talkback button. "Everyone into the control room."

Eddie set down his guitar. This was it. The letdown. The disappointment. He'd gotten one chance to do something great, and he'd—

"Come on," Rico said gently, gesturing toward the control room door.

They filed in. The control room was smaller, with all of them packed in there. Morris stood at the center of the console, Bob beside him. The huge studio monitors hung on the wall, silent.

"I want you to hear something," Morris said. He pressed play.

The opening chords filled the room, huge, clear, every instrument perfectly balanced. Morris's keyboard and Eddie's guitar weaving together in a texture that made Eddie's breath stop. Then his voice came in, and Eddie almost didn't recognize it.

It sounded... real. Raw. Not polished or perfect, but honest in a way that radio vocals never were. He could hear the emotion, the memory, the prayer woven into every phrase.

The chorus hit, and the room seemed to vibrate with it. The band was locked together like they'd been playing the song for years. Every accent landed. Every dynamic shift served the lyric.

Eddie listened to himself sing the bridge with Morris, heard both their voices proclaiming "we got to raise up, a brand-new nation," and felt tears burning behind his eyes. That was the moment. That was when he'd seen himself handing the jacket to the homeless man. That was when the song had stopped being notes and words and had become something life-changing.

The final chord faded into silence.

Morris let the silence sit for a moment. Then he looked out through the control room window toward the tracking room.

His face changed.

"Bob," he said quietly. "Look."

Everyone turned.

Through the thick glass, in the far corner of the tracking room near the amp wall, a shaft of sunlight had pierced the bay windows. It hadn't been there during the take, Eddie was certain. The sky had been overcast all morning.

But now, a single beam of light cut through the room at a sharp angle, illuminating the Neumann microphone where Eddie had just sung. The light hit the old mic and reflected off its metallic grille, creating a brilliant point of radiance in the otherwise shadowed room. The top of it had disappeared in the light.

"That wasn't there two minutes ago," Bob said softly.

They all stood staring. The light held steady, focused on that one spot, as if heaven itself had reached down to mark the moment.

Morris cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was thick. "I've been in studios for thirty years. I've never seen light do that."

Eddie couldn't speak. Couldn't move. He just stared at that impossible shaft of sunlight illuminating the microphone, and knew, *knew*, that God had just signed His approval on what they'd recorded.

Morris turned to the band, his eyes glistening. "What do you think?"

Rico spoke first, "First take is the keeper."

Pete nodded slowly, still looking at the light. "No question."

Jimmy just said, "Perfect."

Morris looked at Bob, who smiled and said, "I've engineered five hundred sessions. That's a keeper. Don't touch it."

Eddie's mind was reeling. "But I thought that was just a dry run. For levels."

Morris's smile was knowing. Almost mischievous. "We tricked you. The first take for me is usually the best. No nerves, just talent. No overthinking, just truth." He paused, his voice growing serious. "Eddie, this is the one. Trust me. You won't do it any better. This is what we came here to capture, and we got it."

The shaft of light still held on the microphone, steady and glowing.

Eddie stared at it. At the impossible blessing. At the visible sign of invisible grace.

All Eddie could say was, "Thank God."

"Exactly," Morris said quietly, looking at the light. "Thank God."

Chapter 12: The Battle

Morris's eyes opened at 5 AM, though he'd barely slept. He'd lain awake until midnight, his mind racing through the day ahead like a mental checklist he couldn't stop reviewing.

Studio at 6 AM. Record background vocals on Eddie's song. Have Bob make a half-inch production master tape. Be in New York City by noon, no, 1 PM now. The mastering session at Corry's was booked for one o'clock sharp. Get the song mastered. Get it ready for the radio.

Get it out into the world before something stops him.

That last thought had kept him awake. Before something stopped him, where had that come from?

Morris sat up in the pre-dawn darkness of his bedroom and felt it, a weight pressing on his chest that had nothing to do with anxiety and everything to do with opposition. The kind his grandmother had warned him about when he was twelve years old, sitting on her porch in Florida while she taught him to memorize Scripture.

"Baby," she'd said, "when you're doing the Lord's work, the enemy comes to stop you. But you got to know your weapons. You got to know Psalm 91."

Morris hadn't thought about that conversation in years. But now, in the darkness, the words came back like they'd been waiting.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty..."

He whispered the opening verses as he got out of bed, feeling the oppression lift slightly. Just slightly. Enough to move.

The studio was dark when Morris arrived at 5:45 AM. He unlocked the front door and flipped on the lights, half expecting something to be wrong. Equipment damaged. A pipe burst. Something.

Everything looked normal.

He made coffee in the small kitchen off the lounge, hands steady despite the heaviness still pressing on him. He could feel it trying to slow him down. Make him second-guess. Make him afraid.

What if the song draws negative feedback? What if people think you've lost your edge? What if this blackballs you in the industry?

The thoughts came fast, each one reasonable on the surface but carrying an undercurrent of fear that felt planted.

Morris carried his coffee into the control room and sat at the console. The 48-track SSL board gleamed under the studio lights, meters dark and silent. He looked through the glass at the tracking room where Eddie had sung yesterday, where that impossible shaft of sunlight had marked the microphone.

"I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust...'"

The oppression pushed back harder. Morris felt it like a physical thing now, exhaustion that shouldn't be there, doubt creeping into every thought.

This song is too preachy. It won't help anyone. You're risking everything for nothing.

Morris set down his coffee and spoke the next verse aloud.

"Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence."

The heaviness eased. Not gone, but manageable.

Bob arrived at six sharp, looking surprised to see Morris already there.

"You're eager," Bob said, setting down his travel mug.

"Can't wait," Morris said, forcing lightness into his voice. "Let's lay down those background vocals."

They worked quickly. Morris had arranged a simple two-part harmony for the choruses, with his voice doubling Eddie's on the lower part and a higher third added on top. Both parts were double-tracked and repeated across seven tracks each. It took forty minutes to record, and another twenty to pick the best takes.

At 7:15, Bob began mixing down to the half-inch master tape.

That's when the trouble started.

The tape machine made a sound Morris had never heard before, a grinding, scraping noise that made Bob's face go white.

"That's not good," Bob muttered, stopping the machine. He opened the tape deck and peered inside. "Roller bearing is seized. This shouldn't happen. This machine was serviced last month."

Morris felt the oppression surge, almost triumphant.

You're not going to make it. You'll miss the mastering session. The song will sit on a shelf.

"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge..."

Morris prayed it silently while Bob worked, hands moving fast, replacing the bearing from their spare parts kit. Twenty minutes lost. Then thirty.

"Got it," Bob finally said, threading new tape. "Let's try again."

The machine ran smoothly this time. The automated mix transferred perfectly to the half-inch master. Bob burned the DAT tape without incident, though Morris kept praying under his breath, waiting for the next thing to go wrong.

At 8:45, Morris had both tapes in his hands, the physical copies of "Second Chances," ready for mastering.

"I'm heading to New York," Morris told Bob. "Mastering session at one."

Bob checked his watch. "You'll make it. Traffic shouldn't be bad yet."

Traffic was a nightmare.

Morris hit the first jam in the Bronx, and that's when he knew this wasn't normal congestion. The cars ahead had stopped completely, engines idling, nobody moving. He could see the city skyline in the distance, so close, but he was crawling at five miles per hour.

His appointment was at 1 PM. It was already 11:30.

"A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you..."

Morris gripped the steering wheel and kept praying.

That's when he saw the first one.

A man stepped off the curb into traffic three cars ahead. Morris couldn't see his face clearly, but his movements were jarring, too jerky, limbs bending at unnatural angles as he shuffled between vehicles. Drivers honked. The man didn't react, just kept moving with that distorted gait until he reached the center divider and stood there, staring at the stopped cars.

Morris blinked. The man looked normal now, just a guy in a black jacket. But traffic was still stopped.

His phone rang. Morris grabbed it, grateful for the distraction.

"Morris, it's Eddie." The voice sounded anxious. "I know you're on your way to New York, but I had to call. I'm getting this feeling like... like something's trying to stop this. Does that sound crazy?"

"No," Morris said quietly. "It doesn't sound crazy at all."

"I've been praying all morning," Eddie said. "Psalm 91. I don't know why, but I felt I needed to."

Morris felt something lift, a lightness breaking through the oppression like a second voice joining his in prayer.

"Keep praying," Morris said. "I'll call you when I'm done at the studio."

He hung up and looked ahead. Traffic was moving again, slowly, but moving.

At 12:15, he hit another wall of stopped cars. This time, he saw three figures moving between vehicles: a woman with a face that seemed twisted when she turned toward his windshield, a teenager whose smile was too wide, too sharp. They moved through the gridlock like they were herding it, keeping everyone trapped.

Morris looked away, heart pounding, and spoke the psalm aloud now.

"You will not fear the terror of the day, nor the arrow that flies by night..."

The woman made eye contact through the windshield. Her grin widened grotesquely, mocking.

"...nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday."

Morris held her gaze and didn't stop praying.

"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways..."

The woman's smile faltered. She stepped back, movements suddenly uncertain.

"...they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Traffic broke. Cars surged forward. Morris accelerated, leaving the figures behind, and suddenly he was moving at normal speed, the highway opening up ahead of him.

He glanced at the clock: 12:35 PM. He'd make it.

Corry's Mastering studio was in a converted brownstone in Manhattan's West Village. Morris pulled up at 12:58 PM, grabbed the tapes from the passenger seat, and practically sprinted to the door.

The oppression was gone. He felt light, almost buoyant, as he climbed the stairs to the second-floor studio.

Corry met him at the door, a legend in the industry. He mastered the first hit song for Morris, then the first platinum record, and then all the rest.

"Morris," Corry said, shaking his hand. "Good to see you. What do you have for me?"

Morris held up the half-inch master tape.

"Something that's going to save lives," he said simply.

Corry raised an eyebrow but didn't question it. "Let's hear it."

They went into the mastering suite, a room with a monitor system that cost more than most houses and acoustic treatment that made everything sound crystalline and true. Corry loaded the half-inch tape and pressed play.

The opening chords of "Second Chances" filled the room.

Morris closed his eyes and listened. Eddie's voice came in, raw and honest, carrying the weight of Andrew Station, the old man with the dime, and every broken person who needed to hear that God hadn't forgotten them.

When the final chord faded, Corry sat in silence for a moment.

"That's a powerful song," he said quietly. "Who's the artist?"

"Eddie Marcello. He wrote it."

"Never heard of him."

"You will," Morris said.

Corry smiled slightly. "Let's make it sound even better."

They worked for two hours. Corry adjusted frequencies, added subtle transparent compression, and balanced the levels so every word cut through with clarity. When he finished, the song felt bigger, more urgent, more alive. The bottom end had a thump you could feel even at a low volume.

"That's it," Corry said. "That's ready for radio."

Morris looked at the master. "Could you burn me three copies of the CD? Just in case."

"Sure thing."

Corry cued up the mastered version and hit record on the CD burner. The song began to play again through the studio monitors.

Morris watched the progress bar on the screen, waiting for the burns to finish. That's when he noticed Corry's reflection in the glass, the older man lifting his sleeve to his eyes, trying to wipe them without being obvious about it.

Morris stopped the playback.

"Corry," he said quietly. "What happened?"

Corry kept his back turned for a moment, composing himself. When he finally looked at Morris, his eyes were red.

"It finally dawned on me what that song is about," Corry said, his voice thick. "I hate saying the word suicide, but..." He paused, struggling. "My son. Last month. It got him."

The words hung in the air between them.

Morris almost choked. "It got my sister, too."

They stood there in the silence of the mastering suite, two men who understood the same unbearable loss.

"Corry, it's okay," Morris said. "That's what this song is for. People who are fighting against it need help. People are on the edge right now, and I wish they could hear this before it's too late."

Corry nodded, wiping his eyes again. "How old was your sister?"

"thirty-three."

"My son was nineteen." Corry looked at the speakers where Eddie's voice had just filled the room. "If he'd heard something like this... if he'd known..."

"I know," Morris said.

Corry turned back to the console and restarted the CD burn. Neither of them spoke while the song played through again. This time, Corry didn't try to hide the tears.

When the three CDs were finished, Corry handed them to Morris carefully.

"Get this song out there," Corry said. "Please."

"I will."

Morris paused at the door, then turned back. "Before I go, tell me something. Why didn't you ever tell me about your son?"

Corry met his eyes. "Probably the same reason you never told me about your sister."

Morris nodded slowly. "You're right." He looked down at the CDs in his hand. "The song's working already, Corry. It's not even out there yet, and it's already working. We would've never talked about this, about what happened to them, if it weren't for this song."

Corry was quiet for a moment. "Morris, can I burn a few copies from the master you're leaving? I know DJs all over New York. Radio people who might want to play it."

"Make the copies," Morris said. "But don't give them out until you hear back from me. I need to time this right."

"You have my word." They shook hands, and this time it felt different. Not just business. Something deeper.

Outside, standing on the brownstone steps with the CDs in his hand, Morris looked up at the gray November sky and whispered the final verse of Psalm 91, the one that had carried him through the spiritual battle of this morning.

"Because he hoped in me I will deliver him: I will protect him because he hath known my name. He shall cry to me, and I will hear him: I am with him in tribulation, I will deliver him, and I will glorify him."

The battle wasn't over. He could still feel it, lurking at the edges. But it had slowed for now.

The song was ready. Now it just had to reach the people who needed it most.

Chapter 13

Two days later, the phone rang. Morris jumped. He had been getting veiled threats from anonymous music industry sources not to release the song.

Morris grabbed it on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Is this Morris Stone?" A young woman's voice, hesitant but determined.

"Yes."

"My name is Mary Hope. I'm a student at Emerson. I run a show on the college radio station, Blues on Sunday: Hope for the Best on WBRS, 88.5 FM

"I heard the song Second Chances." "Morris asked, how did you get the CD?"

"Someone mailed it to me. I don't know who. It just showed up in the station mailbox with my name on it."

Morris felt something change, not sure what. Divine intervention, maybe. Or just the song finding its own way.

"I listened to it," Mary continued. Her voice cracked slightly. "Mr. Stone, we've had a number of students here commit suicide this past year. People in town, too. I've been trying to figure out what I could do, how I could help, and then this song just... arrived. I want to play it on the station, if that's okay.

Morris closed his eyes. "When do you want to play it?"

"This Sunday night. My show runs from eight to eleven. I was thinking... would you and the singer want to come over? We could play the song and take calls. Let people talk about it. Let them know they're not alone."

Morris gripped the phone tighter. This was it. The breakthrough. Not a major market station with hundreds of thousands of listeners, but a college radio show where the people who needed the song most might actually be listening.

"Mary, I need to talk it over with the singer, and I'll get back to you. But I think this is exactly what needs to happen."

"Really?" The relief in her voice was palpable. "I was afraid you'd think a college station was too small."

"Small is perfect," Morris said. "Sometimes small is where God starts."

When he hung up, Morris immediately dialed Eddie's number.

***AUTHOR'S NOTE:** THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER DEPICTS A FICTIONAL RADIO INTERVIEW ABOUT SUICIDE PREVENTION. WHILE INFORMED BY RESEARCH, IT IS NOT INTENDED AS MEDICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVICE. IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, PLEASE CONTACT THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE AT 988 OR TEXT HOME TO 741741.*

Chapter 14: The Airwaves Open Up

Mary Hope's voice cut through the radio silence at exactly 8:00 PM.

"Good evening, Boston. This is Mary Hope, and you're listening to *Blues on Sunday: Hope for the Best* on WBRB, 88.9 FM. Tonight we're doing something different."

The studio was smaller than Eddie had imagined, cramped, warm, equipment humming. He sat across from Mary, Morris to his right, Dr. Shea on his left. His hand went unconsciously to his jacket pocket, where his rosary beads rested.

"Over the past year, we've lost students. Kids from the neighborhoods. People who felt there was no other way." Mary's voice carried weight. "I've been asking myself what a radio show can do about that. Then a song arrived in our mailbox. No return address. Just a CD with a note that said, 'Play this.'"

Eddie's hands trembled as he pressed them against his jeans, recalling another night when his hands had shaken as he held a pill bottle in the Arnold Arboretum, hearing a copy of Evie's voice calling him.

"With me tonight is Morris Stone, who produced the song. Eddie Marcello, who wrote it and sings it, and Dr. Thomas Shea, former professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School." She looked at each of them. "Before we go further, if you're listening and you're struggling, write this down: 988. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Or text HOME to 741741."

She met Eddie's eyes. "The song is called 'Second Chances.' We're going to let it play all the way through. Then we'll open the phones."

Mary pressed play.

The opening piano notes filled the room, simple, honest, the sound of someone who'd been in a dark room and found a way out.

"Three hundred sixty-five days in a year..."

Eddie shut his eyes. His voice, recorded in Morris's studio three weeks earlier, reflected everything he had endured.

*"Some people think life's not clear
There's no reason to go on
No reason to go on..."*

Through the glass, the station manager was watching his phone panel. His expression changed.

Morris saw it. Leaned forward slightly.

*"Pain and sadness consume their minds
They think that their whole life's a lie..."*

Mary Hope was already crying, silent tears running down her face as she kept her hand steady on the board.

*"But God knows the way
To life, to life..."*

The station manager grabbed his notepad. Wrote something. Held it up to the glass.

Mary's eyes widened.

Morris read it upside down: *All lines lit, first 30 seconds.*

The chorus hit:

*"It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray..."*

Eddie thought about the pill bottle falling from his hands onto the pine needles. The shapes moving between the trees. The rosary beads in his pocket. The prayer of St. Gertrude breaking through the darkness.

*"It's time for second chances
Don't throw your life away
It's time for second chances if you pray..."*

Across Boston, a girl in a BU dorm room set down the razor blade she'd been holding. Turned up her computer speakers.

*"They think that they're the only one
They want to pack their bags and run..."*

At a bus stop in Jamaica Plain, a man stood with one-way ticket to anywhere. His phone was playing the WBRS stream. He sat back down on the bench.

*"They wanna get away, want to leave this life today
They see their cuts and how they bleed..."*

Dr. Shea watched Eddie's face. The kid was somewhere else right now, somewhere that was dark, somewhere he'd barely escaped from.

*"But Jesus felt the pain
So he loves them just the same. The same."*

The chorus came back stronger:

*"It's time for second chances
Don't have to end this way
It's time for second chances if you pray..."*

Morris looked out the window at Boston's black skyline. He'd produced platinum records, worked with famous artists, and made real money in this business. Now, none of it mattered.

The bridge built, urgent, a call to action:

*"Gotta look around, got to find them
When you find them, you get behind them
Tell them God's there, no isolation
We got to raise up, a brand-new nation..."*

The station manager was on two phones now. He held up another note: *Main switchboard jammed. Website crashing.*

*"It's time for second chances
Don't throw your life away
It's time for second chances if you pray, I said pray..."*

The bridge repeated, the message driving deeper, look around, find them, no isolation, raise up a brand-new nation—

Eddie's hand squeezed the crucifix on the rosary in his pocket. "Saint Michael the Archangel," he whispered under his breath, "defend us in battle."

The final bridge:

*"Gotta look around, got to find them
When you find them, you get behind them
Tell them God's there, no isolation
We got to raise up, a brand-new nation..."*

The piano played out. The last notes faded.

Silence.

Mary let it breathe, five full seconds of nothing but the hum of equipment and the weight of what they'd just broadcast.

When she spoke, her voice was thick with tears. "That was 'Second Chance' by Eddie Marcello. Sixteen years old, from South Boston."

"Every phone line is full," Mary continued. "The main switchboard is jammed. If you're trying to get through, please keep calling. We're not going anywhere."

She pressed Line 1. "You're on the air."

A girl's voice, young and breaking. "I don't want to say my name."

"You don't have to," Mary said gently.

"I'm alone in my dorm room. I have pills." The words came fast, desperate. "I was going to take them, but I heard the song and that part about Jesus feeling the pain, and I just... what do I do?"

Eddie leaned toward his mic before Dr. Shea could respond. "Where are the pills right now?"

"In my hand."

"Okay. I need you to do something for me." Eddie's voice was steady, certain. "Put them down. Not back in the bottle, put them where you can't reach them easily. Can you do that?"

Silence stretched. Then: "Okay, I flushed them."

"Good. Now I want you to find your rosary if you have one. Or a crucifix. Something you can hold."

"I have a rosary that my father gave me."

"Perfect. Hold it. Feel the beads. They're real. You're real. This moment is real." Eddie's hands were shaking, but his voice didn't waver. "That voice telling you to take the pills? That's not real. That's not from God."

The girl was crying now. "How do you know?"

"Because I heard the same voice. In the woods. Telling me it wouldn't hurt. Telling me to follow." Eddie paused. "It was lying."

Dr. Shea spoke up gently. "What's your roommate's name?"

"Sarah."

"Call Sarah right now. Tell her to come back. And then call 988. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Promise us," Eddie said.

"I promise."

The line clicked off.

Morris was staring at Eddie. He'd known the kid had struggled. He hadn't known about the woods. The voice. The bottle of pills.

Mary pressed Line 2. "Go ahead."

An older man, his voice shattered. "My son. Two months ago. He was nineteen."

The studio went still.

"I found him in the garage. He'd... he couldn't finish the sentence, but he didn't have to. The father was barely holding it together. "I keep thinking if I'd just checked on him that night. If I'd just said the right thing at dinner. The song said Jesus felt the pain. Did my son know that? Before he..."

Dr. Shea leaned forward. "Your son was in tremendous pain. When someone reaches that point, their mind is in what we call a suicidal crisis; they can't see past the pain to the truth that's always there."

"What truth?"

"That he was loved. That God loved him. That there were other options." Dr. Shea's voice was firm but compassionate. "The illness lied to him. It's not your fault."

"I should have seen it."

"Depression hides," Dr. Shea said. "It's very, very good at hiding. That's part of the illness."

The father was crying openly now. "Thank you. I just needed... thank you."

He hung up.

"Then on Line 3,"

A teenage boy. "Eddie? You there?"

"Yeah."

"That voice you heard. In the woods. What did it sound like?"

"Like someone I loved. Someone I'd lost. Calling me."

Silence on the line. Then, barely audible: "Yeah. Me too."

"It's not them," Eddie said firmly. "I promise you it's not them. It's something else trying to use them against you."

"How did you make it stop?"

"Prayer. The rosary. The St. Michael prayer." Eddie pulled his rosary from his pocket and held it up, even though the caller couldn't see it. "I prayed, and I walked out of those woods. And I'm here now. You can do the same thing."

The kid didn't say anything else. Just hung up quietly.

Morris looked at the phone board. All ten lines still blinking. More people waiting. Hurting. Fighting.

Mary looked at the clock. It was 8:28. Less than half an hour had passed, and she noticed time seemed to stop.

"We're staying on as long as you need us," she said into the mic. "All night if necessary. We're here. This is *Blues on Sunday*, and tonight, nobody's alone."

She looked at Eddie, at Morris, at Dr. Shea.

Eddie's hand tightened on his rosary beads.

The phones kept ringing.

As soon as they cut to the commercial break, Morris turned to Dr. Shea.

"Doc, I think you need to tell them about Father Benedict. These people need to hear from him now."

Mary looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

Dr. Shea, Father Benedict, set down his headphones and met her eyes.

"My name is now Father Benedict. I was a missionary priest in Haiti. My chapel is on M Street in Southie."

Mary's mouth opened slightly. She looked at Morris, then back at the priest.

Morris leaned forward. "Father, now I know why you had to be here; you need to tell these people about two things: hope and combat."

Father Benedict nodded slowly. "You're right, Morris."

Mary was already reorganizing her notes. "When we come back, I'm announcing this. Everyone on hold needs to hear what you have to say."

The commercial break ended. Mary took a breath and spoke into the mic.

"Welcome back to Blues on Sunday. We have an important announcement. Dr. Thomas Shea, who's been answering your calls tonight, has revealed something our listeners need to know. If you're on hold, please stay on the line."

She nodded to him.

Father Benedict pulled the microphone closer.

"For those who just joined us, my name is Father Benedict. I go by 'Doctor' out of habit, but I'm a priest now. What I haven't told the callers is why that matters tonight."

His voice was calm, steady.

"Some of you heard me mention Haiti earlier. I spent eight years there as a missionary priest with the Holy Ghost Fathers. I went there thinking my medical training, my psychiatry background from Harvard, would be my greatest asset."

He paused.

"Haiti taught me something they never covered in any medical school lecture. It taught me about spiritual combat."

The phone lines were silent. Everyone listening.

"I saw things there I couldn't explain with neuroscience or psychology. Real oppression. Real attacks on the human spirit that had nothing to do with brain chemistry and everything to do with something darker."

"There's an old Latin phrase: *Spes Nostra Salve*, 'Hail, Our Hope.' It is one of the titles of the Blessed Mother; it also means something else. Let me explain. In Haiti, I learned that hope isn't just an emotion. It's a weapon."

Father Benedict's voice grew stronger.

"When you're hearing those voices telling you there's no way out, that you're worthless, that ending your life is the only option, consider this: those thoughts might not be YOUR voice. They might be an attack on your spirit."

He let that land.

"And if it's an attack, that means something crucial: you're worth fighting for. The enemy doesn't waste ammunition on people who are not a threat. If you're under attack, it's because your life has purpose, because you're needed by someone."

Morris felt chills run down his arms.

"Recognizing you're in a battle actually gives you hope. Because if it's a battle, there are weapons. Medical help, don't throw away your medications. Psychological help, therapy saves lives. But also, spiritual help. Prayer. Sacraments. The rosary Eddie talked about. These aren't superstitions. They're tools."

Father Benedict looked at Eddie, then at Morris, then directly at Mary.

He leaned back slightly.

"I came back from Haiti and was assigned to St. Benedict's Chapel on M Street in South Boston. It's there for this reason, for nights like this. We have Mass. Confession. People who will sit with you and pray with you and help you fight."

Mary was weeping again, but she kept the board steady.

"But here's what I need you to understand," Father Benedict continued. "Combat means two things. First, you're in a fight. Second, you're not fighting alone. You have reinforcements. Divine reinforcements."

He picked up his own rosary from the table and held it up. "*Spes Nostra Salve*—Hail, Our Hope. When everything feels hopeless, when the voices are loudest, when you're holding those pills or that razor or standing on that bridge, hope is both the target of the attack AND the weapon against it."

His voice dropped lower, more intense.

"The enemy wants you to believe you're alone. That's the lie. You are NOT alone. God is with you. Mary is interceding for you. St. Michael is fighting for you. And so am I. So is Eddie. So is Morris. So is everyone listening tonight who's made it through their own dark night."

He looked directly at the phone board, at all those blinking lights.

"You matter. Your life has meaning. And the fact that you're being attacked so viciously? That's actually proof that you're important to God's plan."

Father Benedict sat back.

"So, fight. Use every weapon you have. Call 988. Call your doctor. Take your meds. Go to therapy. AND pray. Go to confession. Receive the Eucharist. Ask St. Michael to defend you. All of it. Every single tool."

He smiled slightly, sadly.

"In Haiti, I learned that some battles require both medicine and exorcism. Both therapy and prayer. Both science and faith. Don't choose one or the other. Use everything God gives you."

Mary finally spoke, her voice thick with emotion. She checked the note Fr. Benedict had passed to her.

"Father Benedict's chapel, St. Michael's on M Street in South Boston, is open every day. Mass at 8 AM and 6 PM. Confession by appointment or walk-in."

She looked at the phone board.

"Line 4, you've been holding. Go ahead."

A woman's voice, middle-aged, shaking. "Father... I'm Catholic. I haven't been to confession in twenty years. I've been planning to kill myself for three months. I have everything ready."

"Where are you right now?" Father Benedict asked.

"My apartment. Alone."

"Are the means to harm yourself accessible right now?"

"Yes."

"I need you to do something for me. Put them somewhere you can't reach easily—a high shelf, a locked drawer, outside your apartment. Can you do that?"

Silence. Mary repeated, telling everyone to stay on the line. Then: "Okay, I put them in the hallway closet, locked it, and threw the key out the window."

"Good. Now I want you to make two phone calls. First, 988. Talk to someone there. Second..." He paused. "Call St. Benedict's. The number is 617-268-2000. Leave a message. I'll call you when I get back to the chapel. We'll set up a confession for tomorrow."

"I don't deserve—"

"That's the voice lying to you," Father Benedict said firmly. "God's mercy is infinite. INFINITE. There is nothing you've done that puts you beyond His love and mercy. Nothing."

The woman was crying. "Okay."

"What's your name?"

"Patricia."

"Patricia, I'm going to pray for you right now. And I expect to see you tomorrow. Promise me."

"I promise."

The line clicked off.

Eddie was staring at Father Benedict with something like awe.

Mary told all the callers to stay on the line; they were taking a two-minute break.

After the break, Fr. Benedict spoke.

He leaned forward, his voice steady and clear.

"I know we have different ethnicities on the line tonight. Different religions. Different backgrounds. But hear me on this."

He paused.

"St. Michael the Archangel is mentioned in the Bible, all Bibles, four times. He's not just a Catholic saint. He's in Scripture. Old Testament and New Testament."

Eddie watched as Father Benedict opened a worn Bible he'd brought with him.

"St. Michael ranks among the seven archangels. He's one of the angels mentioned by name in Scripture; others mentioned are Raphael and Gabriel."

Father Benedict looked up at the microphone.

"In the Book of Daniel, chapter ten, Michael comes to comfort Daniel after a vision and promises to be his helper in all things. In Daniel twelve, he's called 'the great prince who standeth

for the children of Thy people.' Michael was Israel's great support during the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Daniel wanted his people to understand that God had not forgotten them, that even though they were enslaved, they had a royal champion."

Morris was listening intently now.

"In the New Testament, in the book of Jude, verse nine, we're told that Michael disputed with the devil over the body of Moses. But the most dramatic reference is in the Apocalypse, chapter twelve, where John recounts the great battle in Heaven. The wicked angels under Lucifer revolt against God, and Michael, leading the faithful angels, defeats the hosts of evil and drives them out."

Father Benedict's voice grew stronger.

"Because of this victory, Michael is revered as the protector. The name Michael is a variation of Micah, which means in Hebrew, 'Who is like God?' It's not a statement. It's a challenge. A battle cry."

He set down the Bible.

"Tonight, many of you are in your own battle. And I want you to have the same weapon Daniel had. The same protection the Israelites had. The same champion John saw defeating the devil in Heaven."

Father Benedict looked at the phone board, at all those blinking lights.

"I'm going to ask everyone listening, everyone on the line, everyone in their car, everyone alone in their room, to repeat after me. Out loud. Say it with me."

He paused, then began:

"Saint Michael the Archangel..."

In the studio, Eddie said it with him. Morris too. Mary spoke the words through her tears.

"...defend us in battle."

Across Boston, in dorm rooms and apartments and cars pulled over on the side of the road, people spoke the words.

"Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil."

The girl with the pills said it. The father who'd lost his son said it. Patricia, in her apartment, said it.

"May God rebuke him, we humbly pray..."

Father Benedict's voice was firm, commanding.

"...and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host..."

Eddie's hand tightened on his rosary.

"...by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits..."

The words filled the airwaves. Filled the city.

"...who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls."

Father Benedict paused, then finished:

"Amen."

Silence on the line. Then, from Line 6, a voice: "Amen."

From Line 7: "Amen."

From Line 3: "Amen."

One by one, the callers responded.

Father Benedict spoke again. "Come to St. Benedict's Chapel on M Street. I can give you a copy of this prayer. We have cards printed. Take one. Carry it with you. When the voices come, when the darkness closes in, say those words."

Mary looked at the clock. Nine forty-five.

"We have more callers," she said softly.

Father Benedict nodded. "Then we keep going."

They stayed on the air until four in the morning.

Line after line. Story after story. Crisis after crisis.

A college student who'd written a suicide note. A veteran hearing voices. A mother who couldn't stop thinking about driving into a bridge abutment. A teenager who could not stop cutting himself. A middle-aged man who'd lost his job and couldn't see a future.

Father Benedict talked to each one. Dr. Shea, the psychiatrist, and Father Benedict, the priest, were both parts of him, working together. Clinical assessment and spiritual warfare. Medical advice and prayer. Science and faith, not opposing each other but reinforcing each other.

Eddie stayed the entire time, answering calls when Father Benedict needed a break, sharing his own story again and again. The woods. The voice. The pills on the pine needles. Recording the song they played.

Morris worked the board when Mary's hands got too tired, keeping the show running, managing the technical side while the spiritual battle raged through the phone lines.

At 3:47 AM, the last caller hung up.

Mary looked at Father Benedict, at Eddie, at Morris.

"We're out of callers," she said, almost disbelieving.

Father Benedict checked his notes. He'd written down thirty-seven names and numbers. Thirty-seven people he'd promised to follow up with. Thirty-seven souls who'd been on the edge and stepped back.

"We'll come back if we're needed," he said into the microphone. "This station, this show, we're here. If the darkness comes again, call Mary. We'll be here."

He paused, then spoke the final words in Latin, his voice reverent:

"Oh Lady, Spes Nostra Salve—Hail, Our Hope."

Mary faded in the closing music.

Eddie sat back in his chair, exhausted.

Outside the studio windows, the first light of dawn was breaking over Boston.

Chapter 15

Morris dropped Eddie off first. The dashboard clock read 4:32 AM.

Eddie opened the passenger door, moving slowly. He looked like he'd aged ten years in the last nine hours.

"Thanks, Morris. That was..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"I know, Eddie," Morris said.

Eddie nodded and headed toward his apartment building.

Morris pulled back onto the street and drove toward M Street. Father Benedict sat in the back seat, his Bible and rosary in hand, quiet but alert.

When Morris turned onto M Street, he could see St. Benedict's Chapel ahead. And something else.

People. Six of them, standing at the door.

"Father," "Looks like you've got folks waiting for you."

Father Benedict leaned forward, looking through the windshield. Even in the faint early-morning light, Fr. Benedict knew.

"They were callers," Father Benedict said quietly. "From last night."

Morris pulled up to the curb. Father Benedict climbed out, then paused and leaned down to the driver's window.

"Thank you. For everything."

"Get some sleep," Morris said.

"I'll try," Father Benedict said, though they both knew sleep wasn't coming anytime soon.

Morris watched as Father Benedict walked toward the chapel. The people turned toward him: a young woman, two men in their twenties, an older man, and a teenager with his mother.

Father Benedict pulled out his keys and unlocked the door. He held it open, and one by one, they filed inside. The young woman was crying. One of the men had his hands in his pockets, head down. The mother had her arm around her son's shoulders.

They were there for confession. For help. For whatever this priest could give them that they hadn't been able to find anywhere else.

The door closed behind them.

Morris sat there for a moment, watching the chapel. The lights came on inside, warm yellow light spilling through the stained-glass windows.

Then he pulled away from the curb and headed home.

The house was quiet when he walked in. He set his keys on the kitchen counter, pulled off his jacket, and went straight to the bedroom. He didn't even take off his shoes. He just lay down on top of the covers and closed his eyes.

The images from the night flooded back. Eddie's face when he talked about the woods. The phone board lit up like a Christmas tree. Father Benedict praying the St. Michael prayer with dozens of voices joining in. The girl who said she put down the pills. Patricia promising to go to confession. The mother who wanted to see her kids grow up.

Morris felt the weight of it all settling on him. The exhaustion was total, both physical and emotional.

He closed his eyes.

Ten minutes later, his phone erupted.

The buzzing started low, then became insistent. Text after text. Call after call. The phone vibrating against the nightstand like an angry hornet.

He cracked one eye open. The screen was lit up with notifications. He reached over and grabbed it.

Twelve missed calls. Twenty-three text messages. All from the last eight minutes.

He scrolled through the names. Rico. Paulie from BCN. Danny at FNX. Lisa at AAF. Tommy at BCN. Names he hadn't seen on his phone in months. Radio people. The tribe. The ones he'd thought were his friends until the blacklist came down.

The messages were variations on the same theme:

"Morris, call me"

"You need to hear this"

*"What did you do last night?"
"The song is EVERYWHERE"*

Morris stared at the screen. His brain was too tired to process what he was reading.

Another text came through. This one from Rico: *"STATIONS ARE PLAYING IT. CALL ME NOW."*

Morris turned off the phone.

He set it face-down on the nightstand and closed his eyes again. Whatever was happening could wait. He needed sleep. Just a few hours. Then he'd deal with it.

He was drifting off when a single chime rang out, another text.

Then another chime.

And another.

Even with the phone off, somehow notifications were getting through. Or maybe he'd only put it on silent. His exhausted brain couldn't remember.

Chime.

Chime.

Chime.

Morris grabbed a pillow and put it over his head.

Chime.

Morris muttered under his breath.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed, and grabbed the phone. This time he actually powered it down completely. The screen went black.

He lay back down.

Silence.

Beautiful silence.

His eyes closed. His breathing slowed. Sleep was coming, finally, like a warm wave at the beach.

Then he sat bolt upright.

What if there was an emergency?

What if Eddie had a crisis? What if Father Benedict needed him? What if one of those callers from last night, Patricia, or David, or Marcus, or that last girl who'd thanked them and hung up, what if one of them needed help?

What if someone was trying to reach him right now, and he'd shut them out?

Morris stared at the dead phone in his hand.

He rubbed his face with both hands and got up.

The kitchen was cold. Early-morning light was just beginning to filter through the window over the sink. Morris filled the coffee maker with water, measured out the grounds, and hit the button. The machine gurgled to life.

While it brewed, he stood at the counter and turned his phone back on.

It took thirty seconds to boot up. Then the notifications started flooding in again. The screen couldn't keep up, messages appearing faster than he could read them.

The landline rang.

Morris looked at the old rotary phone on the wall, a relic from the '70s that he'd never bothered to replace. It rang again, loud and insistent in the quiet kitchen.

He picked up the receiver.

"Yeah?"

"Morris! Thank God. You weren't answering your cell." It was Rico, his voice crackling with energy.

"I was trying to sleep, Rico. It's six in the morning."

"Forget sleep. Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"The song, Morris. Eddie's song. 'Second Chances.' They started playing it."

Morris leaned against the counter. "Who started playing it?"

"Everybody. After you went off the air on BRS, the other stations started getting calls, people who'd heard Eddie's interview. People asking to hear the song. Requesting it. Demanding it."

The coffee maker beeped. Morris reached for a mug.

"How many stations?"

"I don't know yet. But Paulie at BCN just called me twenty minutes ago. He's freaking out."

"Why?"

"Because they threatened him, Morris. The higher-ups. Told him if he played that song, he'd lose his job. But it's playing all over Massachusetts now. People are calling in, asking why BCN isn't playing it. How could he not play it?"

Morris poured coffee into his mug, his hand steady despite the adrenaline starting to hit his bloodstream.

"So what's Paulie going to do?"

"He wants to play it on the morning show. Seven AM. But he's scared, Morris. He's got a wife. Two kids. Mortgage."

Morris took a sip of coffee. It burned his tongue, but he kept talking.

"Tell Paulie if he loses his job, he can work for me at the studio. I'll hire him. Give him my number."

"Seriously?"

"Dead serious. Tell him."

"Will do, Morris. Will do."

Rico paused, and Morris could hear the smile in his voice.

"Morris... you did something last night. I don't know what it was exactly, but you broke something open."

Morris looked out the kitchen window at the rising sun.

"It wasn't me, Rico. It was Eddie. And Father Benedict. And all those people who called in."

"Maybe. But you gave them the platform."

The line went quiet for a moment.

"Get some sleep, Morris. You sound terrible."

"I'll try."

Morris hung up the landline. He stood in the kitchen, holding his coffee mug, watching the light spread across the Boston skyline.

The phone, both the landline and his cell, stayed silent for exactly ninety seconds.

Then they both started ringing again.

Morris managed to sleep until noon. The pounding on his door jolted him awake.

He stumbled to the front door and opened it. Rico Simms stood there, breathing hard like he'd run up the stairs.

"Morris, I got a call from a friend in New York. The program director for Good Morning America wants to speak with you. He's been trying to call, but no answer."

Morris blinked, still half-asleep. "GMA?"

"He said it's an emergency." Rico thrust a piece of paper into Morris's hand. "Here's his number."

Morris stared at the number scrawled in Rico's messy handwriting. "Emergency?"

"That's what he said."

"Okay. I'll call. Let's see about this 'emergency.'"

Rico followed Morris into the kitchen. Morris picked up the landline and dialed. The call was answered after the first ring.

"Sonny White."

"Hello, this is Morris Stone. I was asked to call this number."

"Morris! Thank God." The voice on the other end was rapid-fire, New York urgent. "This is Sonny. I work at GMA. Our producer asked me to track you down. We want the singer you represent, Eddie Mercello, to perform that song. The one that's been playing up in Boston."

Morris's brain was trying to catch up. "You want Eddie to—"

"We have an open slot Friday morning. Nine AM. The outdoor venue in Times Square. Can you do it?"

Friday. That was three days away.

Morris opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His mind was racing. Should he commit without checking with Eddie? Were the guys who recorded the song even available? What about travel? Hotels? Equipment?

But he knew, deep in his gut, this was the opportunity. The break. A national audience. Millions of people.

"Hold the line," Morris said.

He turned to Rico, covering the receiver with his hand. His voice came out in a whisper, urgent, "I don't know what to do. They want us to play the song Friday morning. Nine AM. Times Square."

Rico's eyes went wide. "Friday? That's—"

"I know."

Morris could already hear them. The voices. The industry people who'd turned their backs on him. *Morris Stone went off the deep end when he found Jesus. Morris finally lost it. Morris is done.*

His career could be over. One wrong move and everything he'd built, the studio, the reputation, the connections, could collapse.

The phone was still in his hand. On the other end, Sonny White was waiting.

Morris closed his eyes.

The words came, the prayer his grandmother had taught him so many years ago, when he was a kid sitting in her kitchen. He had been saying parts of the prayer when he suffered from insomnia. Now it rose up from somewhere deep.

As he prayed, scenes from the last few months raced through his mind. Eddie standing at the end of the pier, head bowed over the dark water, praying before the recording session. Bob Mountain's hand tremors as he worked to fix the seized bearing in the half-track machine, the

production master trapped inside, everything hanging in the balance. Morris himself standing near the studio entrance that morning, head bowed, realizing he'd forgotten to pray, twenty years of forgetting God, and even after coming back, he'd slipped into old habits.

He spoke quietly, but Rico could hear him:

"Of the arrow that flies in the day, of the business that walks about in the dark, of the invasion or of the noonday devil. A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you. But thou shalt consider with thy eyes: and shalt see the reward of the wicked. Because thou, O Lord, art my hope: thou hast made the most High thy refuge. There shall no evil come to thee: nor shall the scourge come near thy dwelling. For he hath given his angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all thy ways. Morris's breathing steadied. He opened his eyes.

In New York, Sonny White was pacing back and forth in his office. The Friday morning slot had to be filled. There was no time left. He'd recommended a song about suicide to his boss, without even hearing it first, and they'd given him the green light based on the buzz coming out of Boston. But if this Morris Stone said no, if he couldn't deliver, Sonny's head would roll.

"Come on, come on," Sonny muttered, phone pressed to his ear.

Then Morris's voice came back on the line. Clear. Steady.

"Thanks for the opportunity. I know Eddie Marcelllo will be excited to perform in Times Square. Please get back to me with the details. I'll call you as soon as we get to New York."

Sonny exhaled. "You got it. I'll email you everything within the hour. Travel, hotel, sound check schedule—"

"Perfect. Talk soon."

Morris hung up.

He stood there in his kitchen, holding the phone, his mind already racing ahead. Planning. Organizing.

"Rico, I need you to call the guys who played on Eddie's song. Tell them we got a gig Friday morning. I'll make it worth their while. All expenses paid. Can you handle this?"

Rico nodded. "As far as I know, they're all free. No recording sessions until after Christmas."

"Good. I need you on this, Rico. I have to get Eddie on board. He's going to be nervous about it."

"I got you, Morris."

Morris set down the phone and looked at Rico. His voice was quiet but firm.

"This is going to be crazy. But I have no fear, because I'm trusting, the song belongs to Him."

Rico wasn't entirely sure what Morris was saying, but he could feel something in the room, a certainty, a peace that didn't match the chaos of the moment.

"It's going to work out," Rico said.

Morris nodded. "Yeah. It is."

Chapter 16: Road Trip

Wednesday, 3:47 PM

Eddie walked into his apartment after school. The radiator clanked. His mother was cooking something in the kitchen: garlic and meat. Vinny was sprawled on the couch, one arm dangling, watching game shows.

He handed Eddie the phone without looking up.

"It's Morris."

Eddie took the phone to his room and closed the door. "Hi Morris, how's it going?"

"Eddie, we got a gig."

Eddie's hand tightened on the phone. A gig. Live, in front of people.

"Okay." He tried to keep his voice steady. "Where?"

"I'll let you know when I pick you up."

Eddie sat down on his bed. "What?"

"Be ready. Ten AM Thursday morning. I'll be out front."

"Wait, you're not telling me where it is?"

Silence on the line. Eddie could hear Morris breathing.

"How am I supposed to get ready? What am I going to wear? What amp am I playing through? Do I need—"

"Don't worry about all that. I have it covered."

"Morris—"

"Just be ready. Ten AM Thursday. Look for me out front."

The line went dead.

Eddie stared at the phone in his hand. His palms were wet. He set the receiver down and wiped them on his jeans.

A gig. Tomorrow. Where?

Wednesday, 4:02 PM

Morris hung up and immediately dialed Rico. He didn't wait for the second ring.

"Morris?"

"All the guys available?"

"Yeah. They're in. They're actually excited about it."

Morris exhaled. He'd been holding his breath without realizing it. "Good. I was hoping I wouldn't have to hire studio musicians."

"What should I tell them to bring?"

"A suit and their instruments. The rest is covered."

A pause. Traffic noise in the background, Rico was calling from a payphone.

"Bob Mountain wants to come," Rico said. "Help with the gear and the sound. He knows the guy who runs sound for GMA. They're going to work together."

Morris felt relieved. "Can't ask for more than that."

"He's got contacts at Manny's Music, too. Said you can pick out any keyboard and synth you want for the gig. It'll all be set up at sound check Thursday night."

"Thursday night." Morris looked at the clock on the wall, less than 48 hours.

"How'd Eddie handle the news?"

Morris rubbed his eyes. "Like I thought he would."

"You didn't tell him?"

"He shouldn't know until we pick him up. He'd never sleep if he knew he was the headliner on GMA."

Rico whistled low. "Yeah. You're probably right."

Morris hung up. His coffee was cold. He dumped it in the sink and watched it swirl down the drain.

Wednesday, 9:23 PM

Eddie lay in bed staring at the ceiling. The house had gone quiet an hour ago. His brother was asleep. The only sound was the tick of the radiator and a car passing on the street outside.

A gig.

Where?

He got up. Paced to the window. Pulled back the curtain and looked out at the empty street.

Nothing.

Just streetlights and parked cars and the Gallaghers' dog tied up in their yard.

He went back to bed. Closed his eyes.

His mind wouldn't stop. What if he forgot the words? What if his voice cracked? What if nobody showed up? What if too many people showed up?

He turned onto his side. Pulled the blanket up.

Sleep didn't come.

Thursday, 6:15 AM

Morris hadn't slept. He'd been on the phone with Sonny White twice already, once at midnight to confirm logistics, once at 5 AM when Sonny called in a panic about permits for the outdoor setup in Times Square.

"We're good," Sonny had said, his voice wired and caffeinated. "City approved it. Police barriers go up at six AM Friday. You're confirmed for sound check tonight at seven."

Now Morris sat in his kitchen with a cup of coffee he wasn't drinking, watching the second hand sweep around the clock.

Rico was handling the musicians. Bob was handling the gear. The limos were confirmed for 10 AM pickup.

Morris's stomach was in knots.

His career was on the line. Eddie's future. The song. Everything they'd worked for.

And somewhere in Boston, New York, beyond, people were listening. Calling in. Deciding whether to live or die based on a song they'd heard on the radio.

Morris set down the coffee cup, closed his eyes, and prayed. The same prayer from his grandmother's kitchen.

For He has given His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.

Thursday, 9:47 AM

Eddie was dressed. Black slacks, a white button-down shirt he'd ironed himself, and the snake-skin boots Evie had bought him because she knew he was a huge fan of Stevie Ray Vaughn. He had his guitar case by the door and a small duffel bag with a change of clothes.

Vinny walked past in his bathrobe, hair sticking up. "You look like you're going to a funeral."

"I don't know where I'm going."

"That's weird."

Eddie looked out the front window. No car yet.

The clock on the mantle said 9:48.

He kept biting his lips out of nervous energy. He hadn't eaten breakfast. Couldn't get anything down.

Thursday, 9:58 AM

The black stretch Lincoln pulled up in front of Eddie's house.

Then a second one right behind it.

Eddie saw them from the window. His heart pounded hard against his ribs.

Morris got out of the first limo. He was wearing a charcoal suit, a white shirt, and a thin black tie. He looked like someone going to meet with record executives.

Eddie grabbed his guitar case and duffel bag. His mother appeared in the doorway.

"Eddie? What's—"

"I gotta go, Ma. I'll call you."

He walked outside. The cold air hit him. December in Boston. The sky looked gray, with clouds low overhead.

Morris smiled. Not his usual easy grin. Something tighter. More focused.

"Ready?"

"For what?"

"Get in. I'll tell you on the way."

Eddie looked at the two limos idling at the curb. The drivers in black suits. The tinted windows. Exhaust rising in white clouds.

"Morris—"

"Trust me. Get in."

The interior was warm, with leather seats and low lighting. The musicians were already inside, Rico, holding a travel bass with a short neck, and the drummer whose name Eddie could never remember.

They were all grinning.

"Where we going?" Eddie asked.

The limo pulled away from the curb. Smooth and silent.

Morris looked at him. Let the moment hang.

"Times Square. Good Morning America. Tomorrow morning. Nine AM. National television."

Eddie's face went white. The color drained out of it.

"You're the headliner," Morris said.

Eddie couldn't breathe. He felt slightly dizzy.

"We're doing this," Morris said quietly. "The song belongs to God. We're just showing up."

Eddie stared at him. His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Rico leaned forward. "Breathe, man. Just breathe."

Eddie sucked in air. Let it out.

"I can't—"

"You already did it," Morris said. "At the studio. This is just showing people what you already made."

Eddie looked out the window. They were already on the highway. Moving fast.

Thursday, 10:32 AM - I-95 South

The limo hummed down the interstate. The musicians were talking quietly, laughing about something. Eddie sat by the window, not talking.

He looked back through the rear window. The second limo was right behind them, close.

"Who's in the other car?" Eddie asked.

Morris glanced back. "Security and the instruments."

"Security?" Eddie's voice cracked slightly. "Why do we need security?"

Morris smiled. "Father Benedict wanted to come. He said he'd be there for the spiritual combat."

Eddie turned fully in his seat and looked back through the windshield of the second limo.

Father Benedict was sitting in the front passenger seat, black shirt and white collar visible even from this distance. He raised one hand in a small wave.

Next to him, Bob Mountain was grinning. He turned back around.

Outside, the highway signs counted down the miles to New York.

Thursday, 12:34 PM - I-95 South, Connecticut

They stopped at a rest area. Eddie got out to stretch his legs. The parking lot was full of families, truckers, and people walking dogs.

Normal people. Living normal lives.

Tomorrow he'd be on national television.

He walked to the edge of the lot where there was a low stone wall. Father Benedict came and stood next to him.

"You nervous?"

Eddie nodded; he didn't trust his voice.

"Good," Father Benedict said. "That means you know what's at stake." He paused. "But remember, the enemy wants you paralyzed. Fear that keeps you from acting is his. Fear that makes you rely on God? That's wisdom."

Eddie looked at him.

"You're not doing this alone," Father Benedict said. "I'll be praying the whole time. Bob will be there. Morris. Rico. All of us." He put a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "And more importantly, God will be there."

Eddie nodded slowly.

"Come on," Father Benedict said. "Let's get some coffee. Long drive ahead."

Thursday, 3:18 PM - Midtown Manhattan

The limos pulled up in front of the hotel. The Waldorf Astoria. Gold lettering. Doormen in uniform. A revolving door that never stopped turning.

Eddie stepped out onto the sidewalk. The noise of the city hit him like a physical force, horns blaring, voices shouting, jackhammers pounding, the roar of buses, the screech of brakes.

People everywhere. Moving fast. Not looking at each other.

Morris was already talking to someone at the entrance. A woman in her thirties with a clipboard and a headset, talking rapid-fire.

"Sound check is at seven," she was saying. "You'll have two hours. Setup crew is already there. Mics, monitors, the works. Bob Mountain already called; he's liaising with our audio engineer. Should be seamless."

Morris nodded. "Good. What about—"

"Hotel rooms are ready. Fifth floor. Five doubles. I'll have someone bring up your instruments." She looked at Eddie. "You're Eddie Mercello?"

Eddie nodded.

She smiled. Not a fake smile. A real one. "I heard the song. My sister tried to kill herself last year. She's okay now. But that song..." She trailed off. Cleared her throat. "Anyway. Seven PM. Don't be late."

She walked away.

Morris turned to Eddie. "Let's get checked in. You need to rest."

Eddie looked up at the building. Thirty stories of stone and glass and ornate architecture. People streaming in and out like no one mattered but them.

"I can't do this," he said quietly.

Morris put a hand on his shoulder. "You already did. At the studio. If you have to, just close your eyes and sing.

Bob Mountain came up carrying two guitar cases. "Eddie. You good?"

Eddie shook his head.

"Yeah," Bob said. "That's honest." He set down the cases. "Look at me."

"The equipment's perfect. The sound guy is a pro. The band is tight. Morris has this locked down." Bob's voice was calm. Certain. "All you have to do is sing. That's it. Just sing the song the way you did in the studio."

Eddie nodded. Tried to steady his breathing.

"Come on," Morris said. "Let's go."

They walked through the revolving door into the lobby. Marble floors. Chandeliers. People in suits talking quietly. Bellhops moving luggage.

Eddie followed Morris to the front desk.

Tomorrow morning.

Nine AM.

Times Square.

National television.

He looked down at his legs, which seemed to be walking in slow motion, out of sync yet still moving.

They went to the hotel restaurant and had lunch.

Thursday, 7:03 PM, GMA Studio, Times Square

The outdoor studio was colder than Eddie expected. Industrial. All black walls and exposed ceiling beams with lights clamped everywhere like mechanical vultures.

Dave, the audio engineer said, "Let's get levels. Just play a few bars."

Eddie started the opening progression.

"Stop," Morris said from the side of the stage.

Dave looked up. "I need to hear the vocal to set proper levels."

"He can hum it," Morris said.

"That's not how this works. I need actual performance levels or tomorrow's going to be a disaster."

Morris walked onto the stage. "One verse. With vocal. Then he plays through the rest without singing."

Dave stared at him. "If this goes wrong tomorrow, it's on you."

"It's on me."

Eddie sang the first verse. His voice felt thin in the cold air. When he hit the chorus, he stopped singing and just played the chords.

They ran it three times. On the last run, Dave held up his hand. "Wait. Stop."

He was staring at his monitor. "We've got a ground loop somewhere. There's a hum in the system."

Bob Mountain was already moving, unplugging cables, testing connections. Eddie stood on the stage holding his guitar, feeling useless.

Twenty minutes later, Bob found it. A bad ground in one of the monitor speakers. He swapped it out.

Dave ran the check again. "Okay. We're clean. Eddie, one more time. First verse."

Eddie sang. His voice cracked on the second line.

"Again."

Better this time.

"That's all I'm getting, isn't it?" Dave said to Morris.

"That's all," Morris said.

"Your funeral. We're done here."

Karen, the production assistant, checked her clipboard. "You need to be back here tomorrow at 8:15 AM. Not 8:20. 8:15."

Thursday, 11:47 PM, The Waldorf Astoria

Eddie lay on the hotel bed, staring out his window at the city that never sleeps. Sirens. Horns. People yelling at cabbies as they flew by.

He couldn't remember the second verse.

He sat up. The words were right there; he'd sung them a thousand times, but now they were slipping away.

He picked up his guitar. Started playing. The chords came automatically. But when he opened his mouth to sing, nothing came out. Just air.

He set the guitar down. Went to the bathroom. Splashed cold water on his face. The person in the mirror looked like a stranger.

He went back to bed. Stared at the ceiling crack. Whispered the lyrics in the dark. Over and over.

Sleep never came.

Morris sat at his desk, papers spread everywhere. Call sheets. Logistics. Backup plans. He'd checked them twice already, but he read through them again anyway.

His fingers drummed in rapid succession on the armrest. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. He forced them to stop. They started again thirty seconds later.

He stood. Paced to the window. Times Square glowed below. He checked his watch. 11:52. Checked it again. Still 11:52.

He sat back down. The papers were already organized. He straightened them anyway.

Father Benedict walked through Times Square toward St. Patrick's Cathedral. The streets were quieter here. Steam rising from grates in the sidewalk.

Inside the cathedral, he knelt in the side chapel. St. Jude. Patron saint of lost causes.

He didn't pray the rosary. He just knelt there thinking about spiritual combat, how the enemy moved. Not with obvious disasters. With small things. A missed cue. A technical failure. Eddie's voice giving out at the wrong moment.

He stayed until 2 AM. Then walked back through the cold December darkness.

Friday, 6:23 AM

Eddie woke up. Only a few hours of sleep.

The clock glowed: 6:23.

Two hours and thirty-seven minutes.

He got in the shower. Stood under it until the hot water ran out.

When he got dressed his fingers felt numb and clumsy. He couldn't button the cuffs. He left them unbuttoned.

Morris knocked. "We leave in twenty minutes. You eat anything?"

Eddie's stomach turned. "I'm not hungry."

Another knock. Softer. Father Benedict stood there carrying a small leather case.

"May I come in?"

He opened the case. Inside was a small glass vial of oil and a purple stole. "I'd like to give you a blessing."

Father Benedict put on a stole and made the sign of the cross on Eddie's forehead with his thumb. The oil felt cool as he placed both hands on Eddie's head and prayed in Latin. Although the words sounded strange and ancient, and Eddie couldn't understand them, he sensed a change in the atmosphere.

"Do you remember what I told you? About spiritual combat?"

Eddie nodded.

"This is it. Right now. The enemy doesn't want this song heard, so there will be opposition. Your job is to stay focused. Just sing. Nothing else matters."

"I can't remember the second verse," Eddie said.

Father Benedict smiled slightly. "You'll remember when you need to. Trust me."

Friday, 7:52 AM, Times Square

The limos couldn't get through, too much traffic.

"We'll walk," Morris said.

They got out. The cold air hit Eddie's face like a slap.

People on the sidewalk stared. Some pointed. One woman started crying.

Eddie kept his head down.

At the barrier, a police officer checked their IDs. Eddie saw the signs.

THANK YOU EDDIE

SECOND CHANCES SAVED MY DAUGHTER

YOU GAVE ME HOPE

He was getting lightheaded.

Morris's hand was on his shoulder. "Keep walking."

Backstage was chaos. People running. Cameras being moved. Someone yelling about audio patches.

Dave appeared. "Eddie. You're on in ninety minutes. Stay in the dressing room. I'll come get you at 8:45."

Eddie sat on the couch. Set his guitar case down. Stared at the wall.

Nobody said anything.

A knock. Dave stuck his head in. "Eddie. We need you on stage. Now. Final mic check."

They walked through the chaos toward the stage.

Eddie could see Times Square. The barriers packed. Thousands of people. Cameras everywhere.

He stepped onto the stage.

The crowd saw him. Started screaming.

Eddie froze. The sound was enormous. He couldn't breathe.

"Eddie," Dave said through his monitor. "Play something. Quick check."

The pick kept slipping between Eddie's fingers. He fumbled it. Rico handed him another one.

He played the opening progression. It came out muddy.

"Again," Dave said. "And sing something."

Eddie opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

"Eddie," Morris said from the side. His voice was sharp. "Sing."

Eddie forced air through his throat. A single line came out, thin and wobbly.

Dave adjusted something. "Okay. Be back here at 8:55. You go on at 9:02."

Friday, 8:47 AM

Karen appeared. Her face was flushed. "Eddie. Now. We're running ahead. You go on in twelve minutes."

"What?" Morris said. "You said 9:02."

"The segment ran short. We need Eddie on stage right now."

They moved down the hallway, through the wings.

The monitor showed the countdown: eleven minutes.

"Wait here," Karen said. "I'll cue you when we're ready."

Ten minutes.

Nine.

Eight.

Eddie's vision was narrowing. He could only see the microphone stand.

"Morris," he whispered. "I can't."

Morris grabbed his shoulders. "Yes, you can. You're going to walk out there and you're going to sing. That's all."

Seven minutes.

Father Benedict made the sign of the cross over Eddie. "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti."

Six minutes.

Five minutes.

Karen appeared. "Eddie. Move to the stage. We're coming out of commercial in four minutes."

He stepped onto the platform. The lights hit him. The crowd roared.

Someone clipped a body mic to his shirt. Someone else fixed his guitar strap that was twisted in the back.

"Three minutes," a voice said in his monitor.

Eddie gripped the guitar neck. He froze; he had forgotten to tune his guitar.

He clicked his foot switch until it connected to his electric guitar tuner on the floor. Played the low E note and tightened the tuning peg until it locked on the E note. The stress was mounting as he tuned the rest of the strings. Then clicked the foot switch until it connected to his amplifiers.

"Two minutes."

David Hartman's voice: "Coming up after the break, a very special performance from sixteen-year-old Eddie Marcello singing his song Second Chances, the anthem that's been called a lifeline for struggling teenagers."

"Ninety seconds."

"One minute."

The crowd was screaming.

"Thirty seconds."

Father Benedict's voice in his head: The enemy doesn't want this song heard.

"Fifteen seconds."

Morris's voice: Just sing.

"Ten."

The second verse came back. All at once. Every word.

The red light on the camera went on.

Eddie was live. Fifteen million people watching.

He took a breath.

Chapter 17: The Song

The guitar strap cut into Eddie's shoulder. The weight of it solid against his ribs.

Morris's hands hovered over the keyboard. Waiting for the cue. His fingers drummed once against the keys without sound, then went still.

The red camera light blinked on.

Morris hit the opening sequence.

The keyboard notes cut through the December morning. Clean. Memorable. That progression he'd written in the studio, the one that made Bob Mountain sit forward in his chair.

The crowd in Times Square went silent.

Just those keys. Ringing out across the city.

Rico came in on the fourth measure. His bass now locked with the drums, driving that reggae pulse underneath. Not walking. Driving. The backbeat pronounced and solid.

Eddie's fingers found the strings.

The arpeggiated guitar layered over Morris's foundation. Individual notes picked clean, adding texture to what Morris had built.

The heat from the stage lights pressed against Eddie's face. He could feel sweat starting at his hairline.

Four measures. Eight. The intro building.

Morris glanced at him. A nod so small only Eddie saw it.

Eddie opened his mouth.

Three hundred sixty-five days in a year

His voice came out stronger than expected. Gospel-influenced. From somewhere deep in his gut. The monitor fed it back, and for a second, he almost stopped, surprised by the sound of his voice.

Some people think life's not clear

In the front row, a woman had both hands pressed to her mouth. Tears already streaming down her face.

There's no reason to go on

No reason to go on

The drums and bass locked tight. Eddie felt the vibration through the stage floor. Through his boots. Up into his ribcage.

Pain and sadness consume their minds

A spike of feedback cut through the left monitor. Sharp. Brief. Eddie's voice wavered for a half-second, his fingers almost missing the chord change.

Morris held the keyboard note longer. Gave him space. His eyes never left the keys but Eddie felt it, the support underneath him.

Eddie pushed through.

They think that their whole life's a lie

But God knows the way

To life, to life

Boston, WNEW Radio Station

The DJ sat frozen at his board. He'd been talking about this kid for two days straight. Playing the pre-release clips. Reading the emails that came flooding in.

Now the satellite feed was live. Crystal clear.

He reached over. Flipped the switch without thinking. Piped GMA straight to air.

His hand stayed on the fader.

He didn't move.

Times Square

The silence broke.

Not applause. Something else Eddie had never heard. Thousands of people breathing together. Swaying. The whole crowd moving like one organism responding to something bigger than music.

The chorus was coming. Eddie could feel it building in his chest.

The guitar shifted. No more arpeggios. The distorted, sustained melody cut in. Clear. Driving.

Eddie leaned into it.

It's time for second chances, don't have to end this way

Morris's keyboard swelled beneath him. Supporting. Lifting the chorus higher.

It's time for second chances if you pray

A man in the third row dropped to his knees. Just collapsed. His wife's arms wrapped around him, both of them crying.

It's time for second chances

Don't throw your life away

Eddie's breath moved through his vocal cords. He could feel every word forming. Every note sustained.

It's time for second chances if you pray

Sydney, Australia – GMA Studios, 11:47 PM

The evening shift engineers stood around the monitor. The satellite feed had come in clean twenty minutes ago. They were supposed to be prepping for tomorrow morning's broadcast.

Nobody was moving.

One of them reached for the phone. Called the station manager at home.

"Turn on the feed. Now."

A pause.

"I don't care what time it is. You need to see this."

St. Mary's Hospital, Philadelphia

The nurse's station had a small TV mounted in the corner, typically tuned to news, weather, and traffic updates.

This morning, it was on GMA.

A teenage girl in room 340 had asked them to turn it on. She'd been admitted three days ago. Suicide watch. Her parents sitting vigil by her bed.

When Eddie's voice came through the tiny speaker, her mother's hand went to her daughter's shoulder.

The girl was crying.

So was her mother.

The nurse at the desk didn't change the channel.

Times Square

Eddie's fingers were warm now. The strings felt alive under his hands.

The first chorus ended. The band pulled back. Just Morris's keyboard and Rico's bass holding the foundation for the second verse.

Father Benedict stood at the police barrier. His lips moved silently. Not English. Not even Latin. Something older. His hand made the sign of the cross in the air toward the stage.

Eddie caught his breath.

Morris played the transition. Two measures. Three.

Eddie's voice came back in.

They think that they're the only one

The second verse was here, then the chorus

That last chorus hit like a wave.

It's time for second chances

It don't have to end this way

Eddie's voice was shredding. Raw. Every word cost him something.

Then it happened.

A shaft of pure white light broke through the heavy December clouds and fell directly onto the stage. Not stage lights. Not spotlights. Eddie knew the difference. This was something else entirely.

The beam cut through the cold air at a sharp angle, illuminating Eddie where he stood at the microphone. The light hit him and seemed to hold there, creating a brilliant point of radiance against the darkened morning clouds of Times Square.

Rico's fingers froze on the bass. He'd seen this before. In the studio. The same impossible light.

Pete's drumsticks stopped mid-beat, his mouth open.

Morris stared from behind his keyboard, his hands hovering over the keys.

The crowd saw it. Phones lifted. Gasps rippled through the thousands packed into the street.

Backstage, Bob Mountain pulled off his headphones, he reached for the mixing board. "No way," he whispered. "No way that's happening again."

Father Benedict's hand went to his chest. His lips moved in silent prayer.

Eddie felt it. The same warmth he'd felt in the studio when the light touched the Neumann mic. The same unmistakable signature of heaven reaching down to mark the moment.

On either side of the stage, massive LED screens displayed the lyrics in real-time. The words scrolling as Eddie sang them. GMA's production team had set them up for the crowd, but now they served a different purpose.

It's time for second chances if you pray

Morris's hands flew across the keyboard. His backup vocals blended with Eddie's lead. The Gospel influence was overwhelming. This wasn't a performance anymore. This was a witness to God's power.

It's time for second chances

Don't throw your life away

Eddie's fingers found the chord change.

It's time for second chances if you pray, I said pray

Father Benedict stood motionless at the barrier. His face set. Hard.

He'd presided over four exorcisms in his priesthood. Seen things that would break most men. Watched demons scream with rage and fight.

This was no different.

His lips moved in Aramaic. The ancient words of power. His hand made the sign of the cross toward the stage.

Not toward Eddie.

Toward what stood between Eddie and the enemy.

Let him finish.

Murphy's Tavern: South Boston

Frank Marcello had called in sick to work again. Third time this month.

He'd pushed through the door at 9 AM. Early, even for Murphy's. Paulie opened for the regulars who couldn't wait until noon.

Frank sat at the end of the bar. Third whiskey already. The liquid breakfast that would ruin him for the rest of the day. For the rest of his life, if he was being honest.

He was never honest.

The TV above the liquor bottles showed Good Morning America. He wasn't watching. Never did.

"Frank, you seeing this?"

Paulie pointed at the screen.

Frank looked up, squinting through the cigarette smoke.

Times Square. A stage. Some kid with a guitar.

The kid turned toward the camera.

Frank's hand stopped halfway to his shot glass.

That face.

Eddie.

His Eddie.

The sound came up. The kid was singing. Voice cracking. Struggling.

It's time for second chances

Don't throw your life away

Frank thought he was hallucinating, the words cutting through the alcohol fog.

It's time for second chances if you pray

"That's Eddie Marcello," Paulie said. "From Southie. You know him?"

Frank's voice came out rough. "Paulie. That's my son."

Paulie turned. Stared at him.

On screen, Eddie stepped back from the microphone. His throat done. Morris kept singing backup, but Eddie's lead voice was gone.

Then Eddie raised his guitar above his head, giving the band a cue.

Frank had heard that guitar before. Late nights. Eddie practicing in his room while Frank drank in the kitchen. The sound coming through the walls always made him angrier.

Now he heard it again.

Clean. Perfect. Beautiful.

Eddie playing like Frank had never let him play. Not in that house.

The Stage

The melody poured out. Clean. Precise. Every note exactly where it needed to be. The sound that had made him a young legend in Boston clubs. Blue's inflections. Gospel runs Morris had taught him. But stripped of ego. Stripped of flash.

Just the song. Serving the song.

The crowd saw the words scrolling on the screens. Heard Eddie's guitar singing what his voice couldn't.

Someone near the front started singing.

Then someone else.

Then thousands.

(Gotta look around, got to find them

When you find them, you get behind them)

Their voices rose. Eddie's guitar answered. Not showing off. Just carrying them. Lifting them.

Call and response.

The crowd: *(Tell them God's there, no isolation)*

Eddie's guitar: The melody soaring higher. But never competing. Never overpowering.

The crowd: *(We got to raise up a brand-new nation)*

Eddie's answer: A melodic phrase that wept and sang and answered all at once.

The screens showed the lyrics. The cameras cut between Eddie's hands on the fretboard and the massive displays flanking the stage. Thousands of voices carrying the song while the best blues guitarist in Boston gave them everything he had.

Morris kept the keyboard steady underneath. His backup vocals blending with the crowd. Supporting. But anchored at his instrument. Unable to move.

The call and response continued. Eddie's guitar answering each line the crowd sang.

Murphy's Tavern

Frank watched his son's fingers move across the fretboard.

The kid could play. Always could, but Frank never told him.

Frank had hated that. Hated how easy it came to Eddie.

On screen, the crowd sang. Thousands of voices. Eddie's guitar talking back.

Frank looked at the lyrics scrolling on the giant screens behind Eddie.

It's time for second chances

The shot glass in front of him caught his eye. Amber liquid. Like always.

Don't throw your life away

Frank looked at his knuckles. Scarred. Thick. He knew what those hands had done.

He looked back at the screen. At Eddie.

"Eddie." His voice cracked. "I'm sorry. Forgive me."

Paulie glanced over but said nothing.

Frank pushed the shot glass away. It slid across the bar.

On screen, Eddie was swaying. Unsteady.

St. Mary's Hospital

The girl in room 340 sat up.

"Mom, look at the sky."

Her mother turned to the window. The light was visible even here, three hundred miles from New York.

The girl was crying.

"Mom, I want to pray. God, help me."

Their hands found each other.

Sydney Studios

"Are you seeing this?"

The engineer pointed at the satellite feed. Light pouring down over Times Square.

"That's not stage lighting."

Nobody answered. They kept watching.

Times Square

The call and response continued.

The crowd: *(Tell them God's there, no isolation)*

Eddie played the response. Slower now. But every note true. His vision began to blur.

The crowd: *(We got to raise up, a brand-new nation)*

Eddie swayed. His knees gave out. He locked them. Stayed up.

Morris saw it from the keyboard. His hands kept playing. His eyes locked on Eddie.

He couldn't reach him.

One more exchange.

The crowd: *(Gotta look around, got to find them*

When you find them, you get behind them)

Eddie's answer barely came. He was fading. But his fingers found the notes. Only from years of practice.

The crowd: *(Tell them God's there, no isolation*

We got to raise up, a brand-new nation)

Everything was going dark at the edges. Eddie's guitar spoke for him. Not a solo. A prayer.

The final chord. The one that would end it.

Eddie's vision tunneled to black.

He hit it anyway. Let it ring. Pure. Clean. Perfect.

The sound carried across Times Square. Through satellites. Around the world.

The chord sustained.

Faded.

Murphy's Tavern

Frank watched Eddie collapse.

The guitar hit the stage first. Then Eddie went down.

The sound of it echoed through the bar. Through Frank's head.

Eddie didn't get up.

Frank stood. His stool scraped against the floor.

The TV showed Morris running across the stage. Dropping to his knees. Lifting Eddie's head.

He wasn't moving.

Frank looked at the shot glass he'd pushed away. Still sitting there on the bar.

He turned.

"No more," he said. "No more."

He walked to the door.

Pushed it open.

Walked out of Murphy's Tavern into the December cold.

The door swung shut behind him.

Times Square

Silence.

Eddie's guitar lay on the stage. His body was motionless.

Morris held Eddie's head. His hand behind his neck.

"Eddie. Eddie."

Nothing.

Still breathing. But unconscious. Completely gone.

The crowd didn't move. The silence stretched. Thousands holding their breath.

Then, somewhere in the back, someone started clapping.

Slow. Deliberate.

Another joined. Then another.

The wave rolled forward. Built. Crashed over them like thunder.

Morris held his friend. Eddie's face was white, drained of blood.

Father Benedict stood at the barrier. His hands were still gripping the rail of the metal barrier.

Was he seeing demons or angels... or both?

The battle was over.

Eddie had finished the song.

Silence.

Then chaos.

"Get the medics! Now!"

"Eddie. Eddie, come on."

Security rushed the stage. Paramedics appeared from nowhere. Green uniforms. Equipment. Someone pulled Morris back.

"Sir, we need space."

"I'm Morris Stone. I was performing with him."

The paramedic glanced up. Recognition flickered. "Mr. Stone, please step back. Let us work."

Morris stumbled backward. His hands still reaching. The paramedics dropped to their knees around Eddie. Checking vitals. Calling out numbers, Morris couldn't process.

The crowd pressed against the barriers. Thousands of phones held high. Recording everything.

Karen Roberts's voice cut through the headset feedback. Professional. Controlled, but shaken.

"We need to go to a commercial. Now."

The cameras kept rolling anyway.

One paramedic lifted Eddie's eyelid. Shone a light. Nothing.

"Unresponsive. Pulse is weak but steady. Let's get him loaded."

They brought the stretcher. Lifted Eddie onto it. His guitar still lying on the stage where it fell.

Morris grabbed it. Held it against his chest.

The paramedics wheeled Eddie toward the ambulance. The crowd parted. Silent now. Watching.

Morris followed. Nobody stopped him.

"Bellevue," one paramedic called out. "Closest trauma center."

The ambulance doors slammed shut.

I-90 East, Massachusetts - 10:15 AM

Frank Marcello's hands gripped the steering wheel.

The Ford Pinto rattled at seventy-five miles per hour. The engine strained. But it held.

On the way to his car, Frank grabbed the early morning edition of the Boston Herald. The newspaper sat on the passenger seat. Eddie's face stared up at him. That photo. The stretcher. Times Square.

Critical condition.

Frank's mouth was dry. Two hours since his last drink. Maybe three.

The craving sat in his chest like a fist. Not pain exactly. Pressure. A hollow ache that spread through his ribs, into his throat, down into his hands.

Just one drink. Just to settle his nerves. Just to make it stop.

Every exit sign was a decision.

WORCESTER - FOOD GAS LODGING

There'd be a package store. Two minutes off the pike. In and out. A pint. Something cheap. He wouldn't even need to stop driving. Just sip it. Just enough to quiet the noise in his head.

Frank's foot pressed the gas pedal harder.

He passed the exit.

His hands were restless on the wheel. Fingers tapping. Needing something to hold. The phantom weight of a bottle. It all came from forty years of reaching for a glass, feeling the heft of it, the promise of relief inside.

The highway stretched ahead. Gray. Endless.

Eddie's voice from the TV played in his head.

Don't throw your life away.

He'd thrown his own life away years ago. Bottle by bottle. Day by day.

Eddie had been nine years old the first time he found Frank passed out on the couch. Frank remembered waking up to small hands shaking his shoulder.

"Dad. Dad, wake up."

Eddie's voice. High. Scared.

Frank had pushed him away. Stumbled to the bathroom. Vomited. Eddie standing in the doorway watching. Those big eyes. Not crying. Just watching.

Like he was memorizing what his father was.

Frank's knuckles were white on the wheel.

The GPS showed two hours to New York. Traffic permitting.

What if Eddie died before he got there?

What right did he have to be there anyway?

The craving surged. Stronger now. Not just want. Need. His chest constricted. Anxiety clawing up his throat.

One drink would fix it. Just one.

Framingham: Next Exit

Frank's breathing was shallow. Fast. His shirt stuck to his back with sweat, even though the heater barely worked.

This was worse than usual. Worse than it should be at three hours without a drink. The pull was too strong. Too loud.

He couldn't do this. He wasn't strong enough.

Don't throw your life away.

Eddie's voice. Singing. Pleading.

Eddie, who'd tried to call him six months ago. Frank had let it go to voicemail. Deleted it without listening.

Eddie, who'd sent a Christmas card two years back. Frank had thrown it away unopened.

Eddie, who'd stood in the doorway at fourteen, suitcase in hand, and said, "I can't stay here anymore, Dad."

And Frank had said—

God, what had he said?

Something cruel. Something about Eddie being ungrateful. About how he'd never make it on his own.

Frank's vision blurred. Tears or exhaustion or both.

The highway sign: NEW YORK - 130 MILES

The voice in his head wasn't his own anymore. Insistent. Urgent.

You can't make it. You're going to fail. You always fail. Pull over. Just pull over. One drink. You need it. You won't make it without it.

Frank felt a pounding headache begin to throb

"No."

His voice was hoarse, loud in the empty car.

"No. Not this time."

The Pinto's engine groaned. Frank pressed harder on the gas.

Seventy-eight. Eighty.

The anxiety screamed in his chest. The craving burned his insides.

But Frank kept driving.

Mile marker 126. Then 125. Then 124.

Eddie's face on that newspaper. Pale. Unconscious.

Don't throw your life away.

"I won't," Frank whispered. "Not today."

His hands gripped the wheel harder.

The highway stretched ahead.

He drove.

Bellevue Hospital: 11:30 AM

Morris sat in the waiting room. Still in his stage clothes. Keyboard-player vest. Dress shirt. The guitar case at his feet.

His phone wouldn't stop. Calls. Texts. Notifications. The performance was everywhere. Trending worldwide. Video clips. Commentary.

He'd turned the sound off an hour ago.

The waiting room TV played CNN on mute. Footage of the performance. Eddie singing. Then the collapse. Over and over.

Morris looked away.

A woman across from him recognized him. Whispered to her husband. Morris saw her pull out her phone.

He didn't care.

His hands rested on the guitar case. Eddie's guitar. The one that had carried the song when Eddie couldn't.

Morris's lips moved silently.

Lord, please. Let him be okay. Please.

The double doors opened. A doctor emerged. Scrubs. Tired eyes.

"Family of Edward Marcello?"

Morris stood. "I'm Morris Stone. I was performing with him when he collapsed."

The doctor's expression shifted. Recognition. "Mr. Stone. I'm Dr. Alphonso. Eddie is stable. We've moved him to ICU."

"What happened?"

"Severe exhaustion. Dehydration. Electrolyte imbalance. His body essentially shut down. It's—" Dr. Alphonso paused. "I've seen athletes collapse like this. Marathon runners who push past their limits. His vitals are improving, but he's still unconscious."

"Can I see him?"

"ICU has restricted visiting. Immediate family only right now."

Morris's shoulders sagged.

Dr. Alphonso looked at him. At the guitar case. At Morris's face.

"Give us another hour," he said quietly. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

The doctor disappeared back through the doors.

Morris sat down. The case between his knees.

One hour.

He waited.

I-95 South, Connecticut, 1:45 PM

Frank hit traffic outside New Haven.

Brake lights stretching for miles. The Pinto crawled. Twenty miles per hour. Then ten. Then stopped.

Frank's hands drummed on the wheel. The craving was constant now. Not waves anymore. Just a steady, grinding pressure.

Five hours since his last drink.

His phone sat in the cupholder. Dead. He'd forgotten to charge it.

No way to call ahead. No way to know if Eddie was alive or dead.

The cars ahead didn't move.

He couldn't just sit here. He had to move. Had to do something.

The shoulder was open. Empty.

Frank looked at it. Calculated. If he could get past this jam, maybe—

No. He'd get pulled over. Arrested. Never make it to New York.

He forced his hands to stay on the wheel. Forced himself to breathe.

In. Out. In. Out.

The voice in his head was screaming now.

You're not going to make it. He's going to die, and you'll never see him again. Never tell him you're sorry. Never—

"Shut up," Frank said out loud. "Shut up, shut up."

The car in front of him moved. Ten feet. Stopped again.

Frank followed. Ten feet. Stopped.

Eddie at his high school graduation. Frank had promised to be there. Had even bought a new shirt. Put it on that morning.

Then stopped at Murphy's. Just one drink. Just to calm his nerves.

He'd woken up six hours later on the barroom floor, with Paulie closing up around him.

Eddie had called that night. Frank didn't answer.

Eddie never asked him to another event.

Frank's vision blurred.

The traffic moved again. Fifty feet this time.

The GPS recalculated. NEW YORK - 1 HR 47 MIN

Frank wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

He could do this. He could make it.

He had to make it.

The Pinto rolled forward. Inch by inch.

Frank drove.

Bellevue Hospital, 2:47 PM

Father Benedict arrived in a cab.

Morris saw him through the waiting room window. The black suit. The white collar. The steady, unhurried walk of a man who'd seen everything and feared nothing.

The priest came through the doors. His eyes found Morris immediately.

"Morris, how is he?"

"Stable. Unconscious. They moved him to the ICU. Doctor said I could see him in, " Morris checked his watch. "Ten minutes ago."

"Let's go find out."

They walked to the ICU desk together. The nurse looked up. Her expression shifted when she saw the collar.

"Father. Are you here for Edward Marcello?"

"I am."

"Room 7. Down the hall, third door on the left." She looked at Morris. "You can both go in. Just keep it brief."

Morris grabbed the guitar case. Followed Father Benedict down the corridor.

The ICU was quiet. Machines beeping in rhythm. Soft voices behind curtains.

Eddie's room was small. Dim. The blinds half-closed against the winter afternoon light.

Eddie lay in the bed. Pale. IV lines in both arms. Monitors tracking his heartbeat, his oxygen, his breathing. The oxygen cannula in his nose hissed softly.

But his chest rose and fell. Steady. Regular.

Alive.

Morris set the guitar case against the wall. Pulled a chair close to the bed. Sat down hard.

His hand came to rest on the bed rail. Close to Eddie's arm but not touching. Not yet.

Father Benedict stood at the foot of the bed. Silent. His eyes on Eddie's face.

Morris watched the priest. Saw something there. Relief. Certainty.

"Father?"

Father Benedict didn't look away from Eddie. "The battle is over, for now."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

The priest moved to the other side of the bed. Made the sign of the cross over Eddie. His hand rested briefly on Eddie's forehead. A blessing.

"What he did..." Father Benedict's voice was quiet. "It cost him everything he had, but he won."

"Then why won't he wake up?"

"His body needs time. What he poured out up there, " The priest gestured vaguely toward the window. Toward Times Square, somewhere beyond. "—it was everything. Body, soul, spirit. All of it. He needs to rest now."

Father Benedict settled into a chair on the opposite side of the bed. He pulled a small prayer book from his pocket. Not his breviary. Something older.

"I'll stay for a while," he said. "Pray with him. With you, if you'd like."

Morris nodded. "I'd like that."

The priest's lips began to move. Quiet. Latin, then English. The cadence was familiar even when the words weren't.

Morris bowed his head. His own prayer simpler. More desperate.

Thank You. Thank You for bringing him through. Thank You. Please let him wake up. Please.

The machines beeped their steady rhythm.

Eddie's chest rose and fell.

Outside, the winter sun slanted lower. The city rumbled on. Oblivious.

Inside Room 7, three men waited.

Two praying. One sleeping.

Eddie's eyes opened.

The ceiling was white. Sterile. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead.

His body felt heavy. Disconnected.

He tried to move his hand. It barely shifted. A slight pinch as the IV tubing pulled against his skin.

"Eddie."

Morris's voice. Close.

Eddie turned his head. Slow. Everything was slow.

Morris sat beside the bed, his face showing weariness yet relief. His hand reached out and gently rested on Eddie's arm.

"You're okay," Morris said. "You're at Bellevue. You collapsed during the performance."

Eddie's throat was dry. He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Morris reached for a cup of water. Held the straw to Eddie's lips. "Small sips."

The water was cool. It hurt to swallow.

Eddie managed one word. "How long?"

"About six hours. You've been out for six hours."

Eddie closed his eyes. The performance came back in fragments. Times Square. The lights. The song. The presence. The weight lifting.

Then nothing.

"Did we—" Eddie's voice cracked. "Did we finish?"

Morris smiled. "Yeah. We finished. The whole world heard it."

Eddie exhaled. A long, shaky breath.

Father Benedict stepped into view. The black suit. The collar. The calm, steady presence Eddie had come to recognize.

"Edward."

"Father."

The priest pulled a chair closer. Sat down on the other side of the bed.

"You did well," Father Benedict said quietly. "It's done."

Eddie felt something, as though a rope that had been pulled tight for months was finally going slack.

Tears slid down his face. He didn't try to stop them.

Morris squeezed his arm gently. "Rest, Eddie. Just rest."

Eddie nodded. His eyes closed again. The exhaustion pulled him down like gravity.

He slept.

Lower East Side, New York - 3:15 PM

Frank pulled into a parking garage six blocks from Bellevue.

The attendant quoted him forty dollars for the day.

Frank paid. Didn't argue. Didn't have the energy.

He locked the Pinto. Grabbed his wallet, his keys.

The craving sat in his chest like a stone. Five hours now. Maybe six. He'd lost track.

The city was loud. Sirens. Car horns. Voices overlapping in languages Frank didn't recognize. The sidewalks were crowded. People moving fast. Heads down.

Frank walked toward First Avenue. His phone was still dead. But he'd seen the blue signs. Bellevue was close.

The cold bit through his jacket. December wind off the East River. Frank shoved his hands in his pockets. Kept his head down.

At the corner of First and 26th, he saw them.

Three men. Huddled against the side of a building. Blankets wrapped around their shoulders. One held a bottle in a paper bag. Another's face was red. Broken capillaries across his nose and cheeks.

The third man was younger. Maybe forty. His skin had a yellow tint. His eyes sunken. His belly distended beneath his coat.

Frank stopped.

The younger man caught his eye. Held it for a moment. No recognition. Just the hollow stare of someone too tired to care.

Frank's hand went to his abdomen. The swelling there. Hidden beneath his shirt. Beneath his jacket. Nobody could see it yet. But he felt it. The pressure. The pain when he pressed too hard.

He knew what it was.

The same thing killing the younger man on the corner.

He'd been told three months ago. The doctor had used words like "decompensated" and "end-stage" and "palliative care." Frank had nodded. Signed the forms. Walked out of the clinic and straight to Murphy's.

He told nobody.

Not Vinny. Not his neighbors. Not Eddie.

What was there to say?

He'd done this to himself. Thirty years of bottles. Thirty years of choosing alcohol over everything else. Over his wife, his son. Over his own life.

And now the bill had come due.

Three months.

Maybe less.

Frank looked at the man on the corner. The yellow skin. The swollen belly. The empty eyes.

That was him. Just a few months ahead.

The craving screamed in Frank's chest. Louder now. Insistent.

What does it matter? You're dying anyway. One drink won't change that. You've got nothing left to lose.

Frank's hands shook in his pockets.

He turned away from the men. Kept walking.

First Avenue stretched ahead. Gray. Endless.

His legs felt weak. His breath came short. The walk from the garage shouldn't have tired him this much. But everything tired him now. Everything hurt.

He passed a bodega. Saw the beer signs in the window. Neon. Bright.

He passed a liquor store. The door was propped open. He could see the shelves inside. Rows and rows of bottles. Whiskey. Vodka. Gin.

Frank's feet slowed. Almost stopped.

Just one. Just to get through this. Just to see Eddie without shaking. Just to—

"No."

His voice was hoarse. Barely audible over the traffic.

He forced his feet to move. One step. Then another.

Bellevue's sign appeared ahead. Blue and white. The emergency entrance. The main building beyond.

Frank stopped at the corner. Waited for the light.

His reflection stared back at him in the glass door of a closed shop. Thin. Hollow-eyed. Skin pale with a faint yellow undertone he'd been ignoring for weeks.

He looked like his father had looked at the end.

The light changed.

Frank crossed the street.

Bellevue Hospital, 3:47 PM

The lobby was massive. Sterile. People everywhere. Visitors. Patients. Staff in scrubs moving quickly.

Frank stood just inside the doors. Lost.

He didn't know where Eddie was. Didn't know what floor. What room.

The information desk was across the lobby. A woman in a blue volunteer jacket sat behind it. She was helping someone else. An elderly man asking directions in broken Italian.

Frank waited.

The craving was a roar now. His mind fracturing under the pressure.

The woman at the desk finished with the man. Looked up at Frank. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for—" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "Edward Marcello. He was brought in this morning. From Times Square."

The woman's expression changed. Recognition. She typed into her computer. "Are you family?"

"I'm his father."

She looked at him. Something in her eyes changed. Not suspicion exactly. Assessment.

"ICU. Seventh floor. Take the elevators at the end of this hall. Turn right when you get off."

"Thank you."

He walked toward the elevators. His legs felt as though they were wrapped in iron. Heavy.

The hallway was long. Bright. Every step echoed.

He reached the elevators. Pressed the up button.

The doors opened immediately. Empty.

Frank stepped inside.

The panel showed floors one through fifteen. His finger hovered over the button for seven.

The craving surged. One last desperate push.

You can't do this. You're not strong enough. He doesn't want to see you. You'll just make it worse. Leave. Walk out. Find a bar. It's over anyway. You're dying. What does it matter?

He thought of Eddie on the TV. Singing. Pleading.

Don't throw your life away.

Frank pressed seven.

The doors closed.

The elevator rose. Smooth. Silent except for the mechanical hum.

Frank leaned against the wall. His breath shallow. His heart pounding.

Second floor. Third floor.

Cold sweat was sticking his shirt to his back.

Fourth floor. Fifth floor.

What was he going to say? What could he possibly say?

I'm sorry. Too small. Too late.

I love you. Did he even have the right to say that anymore?

Sixth floor.

Frank closed his eyes.

God, if You're there. If You're listening. Help me. Please.

The elevator chimed.

Seventh floor.

The doors slid open.

Frank opened his eyes.

The ICU corridor stretched ahead. White walls. Soft lighting. The quiet beep of monitors behind closed doors.

A sign on the wall: ICU ROOMS 1-12 →

Frank didn't move.

He stood in the elevator. The doors started to close.

His hand shot out. Stopped them.

They opened again.

Frank stepped out.

The doors closed behind him.

He turned right.

And walked toward his son.

The door was half open. Frank stopped and put his hand on the frame.

He could see the edge of the bed. The IV stand. The monitor glowing blue.

He pushed the door wider.

Eddie was asleep.

His face was pale. Thinner than Frank remembered. The IV line ran to his left arm. A blood pressure cuff wrapped around the other. The heart monitor beeped steadily. Slow. Regular.

Frank stood in the doorway, not sure what to do.

Eddie looked like he had when he was a kid. Sleeping in the backseat on the drive back from the Cape. Seven years old. Eight. Before everything went wrong.

Frank stepped inside. Let the door close softly behind him.

There was a chair against the wall. Vinyl. Green. Frank pulled it closer to the bed. Sat down.

Eddie didn't stir.

Frank's hands rested on his knees. His right foot bounced up and down. He pressed down on his knees, trying to stop it.

He wanted to say something. Anything.

But his throat wouldn't work. The words were stuck somewhere deep. Buried under years of silence and shame.

So, he just sat there.

Watching his son breathe.

The minutes passed. The monitor beeped. Outside in the hallway, a nurse walked by. Footsteps soft on linoleum.

Frank leaned forward. Elbows on his knees. His head in his hands.

What am I supposed to say? What can I possibly—

The door opened.

Frank looked up.

Father Benedict stood in the doorway. Black suit. White collar. The same calm look.

The priest's eyes went to Eddie first. Then to Frank.

Recognition flickered across his face. Not a surprise exactly. Something else.

"You're Frank," Father Benedict said quietly.

Frank stood. "Yeah."

The priest stepped inside. Closed the door behind him. "I'm Father Benedict. I've been with Eddie through... everything."

Frank nodded. His voice came out hoarse. "Thank you."

Father Benedict moved to the other side of the bed. Looked down at Eddie. "He did well today.

"I saw it on TV," Frank said. "That's how I knew. I drove down from Boston."

The priest looked at him. Assessing. Not judgment, just careful observation.

"I'm from Charlestown," Father Benedict said. "I have a chapel in Southie. On M Street."

Frank's eyes widened slightly. "M Street?"

"Eddie's been coming to Mass there, for months now."

Eddie. Going to Mass. At a chapel two blocks from where Frank had grown up.

"Father." The word came out broken. "I need," Frank stopped. Swallowed. "I need a confession."

Father Benedict didn't hesitate. "There's a private family waiting room next door. We can go there."

The room was small. Two chairs. A couch. A table with old magazines. A window overlooking the parking lot.

Father Benedict closed the door and turned to Frank.

"Do you remember the prayers?"

"Yes."

Frank knelt on the carpet. His knees protested. The pain shot up his legs. He ignored it.

Father Benedict stood before him. Made the sign of the cross.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Frank's voice shook. "My last confession was thirty-two years ago. These are my sins."

He stopped. His hands clenched together.

"Father, I'm dying." The words came fast. Desperate. "The doctor said three months, maybe less. My liver is gone. Cirrhosis. I haven't prayed in a long time. But before you came into Eddie's room, I heard something. Words. In my head. 'Go to confession.' It didn't make sense. But now, " His voice broke. "Now it does."

Father Benedict's expression didn't change. Calm. Listening.

"You need to make a general confession," he said gently. "It's important to confess everything you can remember from your life. Don't skip anything out of embarrassment. In God's divine providence, He set up this confession for you. To save your soul."

Frank nodded, tears already starting.

"The first sin I remember," Frank said, "was stealing whiskey from a bottle my father kept in his room. I was eight. Maybe nine. I'd take sips when no one was around. Then I'd fill it back up with water so he wouldn't notice."

"Continue," Father Benedict said. "Just the sins. And how many times, as best you can remember."

Frank spoke.

He confessed the drinking. The binges. The times he'd driven drunk with Eddie in the car.

He confessed the anger. The adult magazines and what that lead to. The words he'd said to his wife. To his son. Words meant to wound.

He confessed the neglect. The adultery. The lies to cover birthdays missed. The games he'd promised to attend but never showed up for. The lies told to cover his drinking.

He confessed his cowardice. Running from his problems. Leaving his wife to raise Eddie alone while he disappeared into the bars.

He confessed his despair. The times he'd thought about ending it. The gun in the drawer he'd looked at more than once.

His voice broke again and again. But he kept going.

Twenty minutes passed.

When Frank finally fell silent, his face was wet. His shoulders shook.

Father Benedict placed his hand on Frank's head.

"For your penance," the priest said, "pray one Rosary, the sorrowful mysteries, and spend whatever time you have left being the father your son needs."

The priest began the prayer of absolution. Latin words Frank hadn't heard in decades. Words that washed over him like water.

"Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti."

Frank let out a long breath and saw a vapor of smoke leave his mouth and float up. He realized later that it was a viable sign of a lifetime of sins leaving his body.

"Amen," Frank whispered.

Frank stood. His knees cracked. His legs unsteady.

Father Benedict opened the door.

Frank stepped into the hallway. His face still wet. His breath coming in short gasps.

"I need to—" He gestured vaguely. "The bathroom."

"Down the hall. On the left."

In the bathroom, he leaned over the sink. Turned on the cold water. Splashed it on his face.

When he looked up, his reflection stared back. Yellow-tinged skin. Sunken eyes. A dying man.

But something had changed.

The weight was gone.

Thirty-two years of unconfessed sin. Lifted.

He dried his face with paper towels and threw them away.

He walked back to Eddie's room.

The door was still half-open. He looked inside.

Eddie was still asleep.

Relief flooded through Frank. He wasn't ready yet. Didn't know what he'd say.

But he would stay.

For however long Eddie would let him.

Frank sat back down in the green vinyl chair.

He closed his eyes and began the rosary.

The monitor beeped softly. Regular. Steady.

Frank's fingers moved over the beads. He'd started the sorrowful mysteries. The penance Father Benedict had given him.

His grandmother's voice came back to him. Sharp. Clear. Like she was standing in the room.

WHEN YOU PRAY THE ROSARY, FRANCESCO, YOU PUT YOURSELF IN THE SCENE. YOU'RE NOT WATCHING. YOU'RE THERE.

His eyes closed.

The Agony in the Garden

The night air was cool. Frank smelled the olive trees. Heard the leaves rustling in the darkness.

Jesus knelt on the ground. His face toward heaven. Praying. Sweating blood.

Frank was one of the soldiers. Torch in hand. Following Judas through the grove. The flame cast shadows on the ancient trunks.

When they found Jesus, Frank didn't hesitate. He raised his fist and struck Him across the face. A closed fist. Hard.

The impact jolted up Frank's arm.

Jesus didn't fight back. Didn't even raise His hands to defend Himself.

Frank hit Him again. Our father, Hail Mary.

The Scourging at the Pillar.

Frank held the whip. Leather cords. Iron tips at the ends.

Jesus was tied to the pillar. His back exposed.

Frank raised his arm. Brought the whip down hard.

The leather cracked against skin. The iron tore through flesh.

Blood sprayed. Drops hit Frank's face. His hands.

He raised the whip again. Again. Again.

Jesus's knees buckled. He sagged against the ropes.

Frank kept striking. His arm burning. His breath coming hard.

The flesh on Jesus's back hung in strips. Ribs showed through in places.

Frank didn't stop. Hail Mary, full of grace...

The Crowning with Thorns.

The soldiers had woven the crown from thorn branches. Long spikes. Curved. Sharp as needles.

They placed it on Jesus's head.

Frank put his hands on top. Pressed down.

The thorns resisted. Then punctured. Sinking through skin. Through muscle. Scraping against skull.

Blood welled up. Ran down Jesus's forehead. Into His eyes. Down His cheeks.

Frank pressed harder. Felt the thorns go deeper.

Jesus's face contorted. But He made no sound. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son...

The Carrying of the Cross.

The street was narrow. Crowded. People shouting. Jeering.

Jesus stumbled under the weight of the crossbeam. Fell to His knees. The wood crashed to the ground.

A Roman soldier scanned the crowd. Pointed at Frank.

"You. Help Him carry it."

Frank stepped forward. His legs shaking.

He bent down. Gripped the rough wood. Splinters drove into his palms.

He lifted. The weight was enormous. His shoulders burned.

Jesus was on His feet now. Blood running from His head. His back. His legs barely holding Him.

Their eyes met.

Frank looked away. Couldn't hold that gaze.

They walked. One step. Another. Frank's muscles trembling. His back threatening to give out. The hill rose ahead, steep and rocky. O my Jesus, forgive us our sins...

The Crucifixion.

Frank stood at the foot of Golgotha. The cross lay on the ground. Jesus stretched out on it.

Frank held the basket. Three iron nails. Cold. Heavy. A hammer with a wooden handle worn smooth from use.

The soldier took the first nail. Positioned it against Jesus's right hand as another guard tied his wrist tight.

He raised the hammer.

The first blow rang out. Metal through flesh. Through the tendon. Into wood.

Frank stared at the basket in his hands. At the remaining nails.

The second blow. The third.

Jesus's hand spasmed. Fingers curling. Then going still.

The soldier reached for another nail.

Frank couldn't look up. Couldn't see Jesus's face. Could only stare at the nails. The hammer. His own hands.

The second hand. The blows came faster now.

Then the feet. Both together. One nail through both.

The hammer struck. Again. Again.

Frank heard Jesus's breathing. Ragged. Gasping.

But he couldn't look up.

"Pops."

Frank's eyes snapped open.

His hands stopped on the beads.

Eddie was sitting up slightly. The bed had been raised. His face still pale, but his eyes were alert.

In his right hand, between the IV line and the blood pressure cuff, Eddie held a rosary. Brown wooden beads. A silver crucifix.

"What mystery are you on?" Eddie's voice was hoarse but steady.

Frank raised his head, trying to hold back tears. "The last decade. The sorrowful mysteries."

Eddie nodded slowly. Closed his eyes.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," Eddie began quietly. "The Lord is with thee."

Frank's voice joined in. Rough. Breaking on some words.

"Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Together: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

They finished the decade. The Glory Be. The Fatima prayer.

When the final words ended, "O my Jesus, forgive us, spare us from the fires of hell, relieve all souls from purgatory, especially the most abandoned ones," silence filled the room.

Frank's rosary hung from his hand.

Eddie opened his eyes. Looked at his father.

Neither spoke.

Then Eddie asked, "How long have you been here?"

"Couple hours," Frank said. "I saw you on TV. At the diner, ah... I mean, at the bar, I got in the car and tried to find you."

Eddie nodded slowly.

Then his eyes narrowed. Not anger. Concern.

"Pops." His voice changed. "You look—" He stopped. Started again. "What's wrong with you?"

Frank looked down at his hands. Yellow-tinged. Sweating.

"I'm sick, Eddie."

"How sick?"

Frank met his son's gaze. "Dying sick. Liver's gone. Three months, maybe less."

Eddie's face went pale. "Does Mom know?"

"No," "I've hurt her enough, so I've been waiting as long as possible. She's starting to notice, though."

Frank swallowed hard. "Maybe dying like this is my penance." He looked up at Eddie's face. "Will you be with me...when I go?"

Of course, Pops. All the way to the end." He paused. "But maybe there's hope. I heard they can do transplants now. We can ask the doctor."

Frank shook his head slowly. "Eddie, I'm too far gone. The cirrhosis—"

"We can ask," Eddie said again. Firmer this time.

"Father Benedict was here when I arrived," Frank said. "He heard my confession. Now I feel like I'm ready."

Eddie nodded slowly. "Then you'll be ready either way, Pops."

Frank's eyes filled. "Yeah. Either way."

"We'll talk to the doctor tomorrow," Eddie said.

Frank nodded.

Outside the window, the first light of dawn touched the New York skyline. The song had been about second chances. Eddie looked at his father and said one last silent prayer.

Thank you.

Millions had heard the song. But only God knew which hearts it had truly reached—which kid standing on a bridge had stepped back. Which teenager, alone in a bedroom, had put down the pills. Which soul in the dark had chosen to see one more sunrise.

Eddie would never know all of them. He didn't need to.

He'd sung the song he almost didn't live to sing. He'd told the truth he almost took to his grave. Somewhere, someone was still breathing because he'd chosen to breathe. That was enough.

His father's hand found his shoulder. Squeezed once. A silent request for forgiveness.

Eddie said, "You know, I forgive you, Pops," as he squeezed his father's hand, trying not to pull on the IV line going to his arm.

Eddie closed his eyes and could almost feel the warmth of the dawn sun on his face. The same sun that had found him in the woods. The same light that had marked the microphone in the studio. The same grace that had pursued him into the darkness and carried him back.

He was still here. And because of that, others would be too.

I'm Yours, Lord. May Thy Holy Will be done in me and by me.

The light kept rising over the city.

Epilogue: One year later

Mary Hope stood in the cramped basement studio of WBRS, the college radio station at Emerson, and watched the phone lines light up. All four of them. It was 2:47 a.m. on a Thursday, and somewhere in the city, four people needed to talk to someone who would listen.

She picked up line one. "Crisis line, this is Mary Hope."

The voice on the other end was young. Female. Shaking. "I don't... I don't know if I should be calling."

"You did exactly the right thing," Mary said quietly. "I'm here. I'm listening."

It had started small. Just Mary, working the overnight shift at the station, taking calls on a dedicated line she'd set up with the College. But word had spread. Students called. Then townies. Then people from neighboring communities who'd heard about the girl at the radio station who actually picked up the phone.

Within six months, she'd needed help. A rotation of trained volunteers. A partnership with local emergency services. And then Father Benedict had introduced her to a group of retired Boston detectives who'd offered to be on call for situations that needed immediate intervention, times when someone was in danger, and the police were tied up elsewhere.

When Fr. Benedict explained the title of Our Lady, Spes Nosta Salve, they agreed to adopt it as their motto, Hail Our Hope. In emergencies, it was their secret signal.

Father Benedict had agreed to serve as a sort of chaplain, which mostly meant being available at odd hours to pray with them or talk them through the difficult calls. The ones where they couldn't reach someone in time. The ones that haunted them.

Now stations up and down the East Coast were calling Mary, asking how she'd done it, how she'd built something sustainable, how she'd gotten the funding, the volunteers, the community buy-in.

She'd helped twelve schools set up similar programs. Thirteen, if you counted the station in Tucson that was still working through the logistics.

The girl on line one was still talking. Mary listened. Asked questions. Made a plan. By the time they hung up twenty minutes later, the girl had agreed to go to the campus counseling center in the morning. She promised to call back if things got worse before then.

Mary recorded it in the log. "Another soul choosing to stay."

The 6:30 a.m. Mass at St. Benedict's was packed, as it had been every morning for the past eight months. Mostly teenagers, coming before school with parents and younger siblings in tow. Father Benedict had stopped being surprised by it. He had just accepted that this was what the chapel had become, a place where young people came to start their day with the grace and peace they couldn't find on the streets of Boston.

Eddie sat in his usual spot in the back. After Mass ended and the church had emptied, he'd go up to the choir loft with Father Benedict and Morris to work on new songs. Morris sat three rows ahead, his bulk making the wooden pew look like a child's chair. He hummed along quietly during the hymns, that deep bass rumble that you felt more than heard.

After Mass, they gathered in the rectory with Father Benedict.

"London confirmed," Morris said, pulling up the email on his phone. "Royal Albert Hall. January fifteenth. They want both of us to perform 'Second Chances' and share our stories. Ten thousand seats."

Eddie felt his stomach drop. "Ten thousand."

"Don't think about the number," Father Benedict said. "Think about the one person in that hall who needs to hear it. Think of it as an audience of one."

Morris grinned. "My agent's losing his mind. He keeps asking who I'm bringing for backup vocals. I told him I'm bringing a subway busker, an acoustic guitar, and a story about my life now, about following God's Will. He thinks I'm joking."

"Are you scared?" Eddie asked.

"Terrified, I'm not used to this. Now I know what you felt like on that stage in Times Square." "But I figure if God can use someone like me to save lives, He can handle stage fright."

Eddie was quiet for a moment. "My father's on the transplant list. Liver. He and Ma have been coming to Sunday Mass." He shook his head slightly, still processing it. "Never thought I'd see that."

Father Benedict smiled. "Grace works in It's own time."

"Yeah, well. He waited until he was half-dead to show up. But he showed up." Eddie looked at Morris. "That's something."

"That's everything," Morris said quietly.

Father Benedict blessed them both. "I'd like to go with you to London, but... Just promise to bring me back some proper English tea."

The package arrived on a Tuesday afternoon. Vinnie brought it up to Eddie's room, eyeing the cardboard tube with suspicion.

"Same as last time," he said, handing it to Eddie. "You want me to stay while you open it?"

"No, I think I'd better open it with Fr. Benedict.

They gathered in the sacristy at the Chapel. Eddie slid the tube open, pulled out the rolled pages, three sheets of medieval manuscript, the same careful hand, the same aged parchment smell.

Sheet music. Another song.

They spread the pages across the table. The notation was similar to "Second Chances" yet different. More complex. Layered harmonies. A melody that seemed to climb and fall.

Father Benedict turned to the last page. At the bottom, in that same precise script: **Sankt Gertrude.**

Below it, a note in German:

Nummer Zwei - Ein weiteres Lied des Lebens - Mehr Arbeit zu tun, mehr Seelen zu retten.

Father Benedict translated quietly: "Number Two - Another Song of Life, more work to do, more souls to save."

Eddie looked at Morris. Morris looked at Eddie.

"Well," Morris said finally. "I guess we'd better learn it."

The knock came at 11:43 p.m., three hard raps on the chapel's main door. Father Benedict had just finished locking up and was heading back to the rectory for the night.

He almost didn't answer. Almost walked away.

But something made him turn back. Made him unlock the door and pull it open.

A homeless man stood on the steps. Thin. Dirty. Wearing a Red Sox cap pulled low and a coat that was wet and torn. He didn't look up. Didn't meet Father Benedict's eyes.

"We're closed," Father Benedict said gently. "But if you need food, I can—"

"I need confession," the man said. His voice was rough and damaged. Father Benedict hesitated, then said, "Come in."

The man followed him inside. Sat in the back pew, cap still pulled low. Father Benedict could smell him from three feet away: unwashed clothes, cheap shelter soap, something else underneath. Something broken.

"What's your name, son?"

The man was quiet for a long time. Then, slowly, he raised his head. Lifted the brim of his cap.

The left side of his face was scarred. Badly scarred. A scarring that spoke of multiple surgeries, of reconstructive work that never quite took.

But his eyes were distinctive. Blue-green. Eyes, you didn't forget.

"Jake?"

Jake Morrison nodded. "Hey, Father. Been a while."

"Seven years."

Now I remember, you were the first person to come to the chapel when we opened.

Father Benedict sat down in the pew across the aisle. Studied the wreckage of the young man he'd known. The golden boy who'd had everything. Who'd used it all to destroy a girl who couldn't fight back.

"What happened to you?"

Up close, the damage was worse. The left side of Jake's face was a ruin of puckered skin and misaligned bone. His nose sat crooked. A surgical scar ran from his ear to his chin. When he tried to smile, only half his mouth moved.

The smile was bitter. "Consequences. My dad disowned me after a fight with Eddie Marcello at the Family Bowl. Cut me off completely. Legal severance.

My father was humiliated. It made the news: 'Local kid, son of prominent businessman, face destroyed in brawl at father's establishment.' The mobsters my dad worked with, the ones who kept his businesses running, laughed at him. They made jokes. 'Your kid got his face rearranged at your own bowling alley, Johnny. What kind of boss can't even protect his own son?'

I've been living in shelters for the past year. Sometimes on the street when they're full."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I earned it."

I heard that the father of someone I knew has been coming to Mass here. Her name was Evie Callahan. Yes, I know him and know about Evie.

"I need to confess, Father. All of it. Everything I did to Evie. Every lie, every time, I made her afraid. I need to say it out loud. I need to... I need to stop carrying it alone."

Father Benedict stood. "Then we do this properly. In the confessional."

Jake followed him to the booth. Knelt in the darkness. Made the sign of the cross.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been seven years since my last confession."

And Jake Morrison, homeless and broken and scarred beyond recognition, began to speak.

He spoke for an hour. Maybe more. He confessed to every cruelty. Every moment, he'd chosen to hurt her rather than walk away.

Then came the hardest part.

"Father, I have one more thing to confess, and it is what has led me to want to end my own life. I did everything I could to get Evie to kill herself. I found out that she was having mental problems, taking medications, and seeing a psychologist, so I kept tormenting her until she snapped."

Silence filled the confessional. Father Benedict let it stretch, let the weight of those words settle.

"Yes, you bear culpability for the harm you caused and the cruelty that pushed her toward despair," Father Benedict said finally. "But Evie made her own choice in that final moment, a choice God alone can judge with perfect knowledge of her suffering and mental state. Your sin was the torment. Her death was a tragedy born of that torment and her illness. Do you understand the difference?"

"I... I think so."

"Good. Because what I'm about to give you as penance requires you to understand that difference."

Jake waited.

"For your penance: First, you will meet with Evie's father and tell him what you told me. He needs to hear this from you. I will arrange it."

"Father, I—"

"Second, you will pray one Rosary of the Sorrowful Mysteries, meditating on Christ's suffering.

Father Benedict paused, then spoke with quiet intensity.

"Third, and most important: Every day, you will choose life. Suicide is not an option. When darkness tells you there's no way forward, it's a lie from the pit of hell. Come here instead. Call someone. Reach out. Evie made her choice in despair, and it was final; you cannot undo what happened. But you still have YOUR choice. Every morning you wake up is another chance God gives you. Don't discard that gift. Remember her by making a different choice. Keep doing this until the desire to live outweighs the impulse to die. Do you understand?"

Jake's voice was thick. "Yes, Father."

"Say it back to me. What is not an option?"

"Suicide is not an option."

"Again."

"Suicide is not an option."

"Remember that. When the darkness comes, and it will come, remember those words."

Then Father Benedict spoke the ancient words of absolution:

Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat; et ego auctoritate ipsius te absolvo ab omni vinculo excommunicationis et interdicti in quantum possum et tu indiges. Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

English - Our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you; and I, by His authority, absolve you from every bond of excommunication and interdict, insofar as I am able and you stand in need. Then I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Amen," Jake whispered, crossing himself.

They left the confessional together. Jake stood in the aisle, looking lost.

"I don't know if he'll see me," Jake said.

"He will. I'll arrange it."

"Yes, Father."

Jake pulled the Red Sox cap back down as they left the confessional. "I saw on the news about Eddie, the song, and what he's doing now. Saving people."

"He's trying."

Father Benedict took Jake Morrison to the rectory. Fed him. Gave him clean clothes and a place to sleep.

In the morning, when Eddie came for Mass, Father Benedict was sitting with a homeless man in the back pew. He watched Eddie's face go still, then soften.

They sat together in the empty church, these three men bound by one girl's death, and figured out what came next. Not revenge. Not justice. Not even forgiveness yet, that would take time, maybe years.

They talked about broken people helping other broken people choose to stay alive. One dawn at a time, one confession at a time, one soul at a time.

Logan Airport: Terminal C Arrivals

Eddie stood at the bottom of the escalator watching passengers descend. His father had offered to come. So had Morris. He'd said no to both.

This was something he needed to do alone.

Six months of letters. Real letters, the paper kind that took three days to cross state lines, that arrived with postmarks and the faint smell of someone else's house. Her handwriting was round and careful. She dotted her i's with small circles. She always signed the same way:

Still here, thanks to you.

He had tried to deflect the gratitude. To redirect it toward God, toward the song, toward the moment that had nothing to do with him. But she had written back with a clarity that stopped his protests: "*Maybe, but you were the voice.*"

Her name was Sarah Mitchell. Seventeen. From outside Philadelphia. She had been in St. Mary's Hospital on suicide watch when GMA aired the Times Square performance. Three days into her stay, the nurses had turned on the television at her mother's request.

Sarah had been planning to finish it as soon as they released her.

Then she heard the song.

Two weeks later, a letter arrived at the label. One page.

"I'm alive because you sang. I don't know what else to say except thank you."

He had written back that same afternoon.

Now she was here. A college visit to Berklee. And maybe to meet you, if that's not weird, she had written. Is that weird?

The escalator brought down its cargo of travelers. A young family, the father carrying a sleeping toddler. A businessman checking his phone. A couple holding hands.

Then: her.

Dark hair pulled back. A nervous smile. A backpack covered in pins, bands he recognized, a small silver crucifix catching the fluorescent light.

She looked like Evie.

Not identical, but something in the tilt of her head, the way her eyes scanned the crowd with that particular mixture of hope and fear that belonged to people who had recently decided to stay alive.

She wasn't Evie. She would never be Evie. Evie was gone, a loss and a grief he would carry forever.

But watching this girl search for a face she had only seen in newspapers, Eddie understood something he couldn't have grasped in the woods, something even the light in the recording studio had only begun to reveal.

He had lost Evie to the darkness.

But Sarah had chosen to live because of what that loss had created, a song born from grief, a testimony sung through tears, a voice that had reached her in a hospital room three hundred miles away.

Evie's death had not been redeemed. It never would be. Death was still the enemy. Suicide was still the thief.

But God had taken Eddie's shattered heart and used it to keep Sarah's beating.

One life lost. One life saved.

Not replacement. Not closure.

Just God taking what was meant to destroy him and somehow, impossibly, using it to save someone else.

Sarah's eyes met his. Recognition flashed across her face. Her smile widened, real yet uncertain.

She raised one hand. A small wave.

He stepped forward.

She came toward him and stopped about three feet away. Close enough to speak. Far enough to preserve the strangeness of meeting.

"Hi," she said.

Just that. One syllable, weighted with six months of letters and a lifetime of second chances.

"Hi," Eddie said.

They stood there, two people who had nearly not existed, regarding each other in the bright lights of the arrival terminal.

She was still here.

So was he.

And for now, that was all that mattered.

Joe was in his office, trying to focus on the quarterly tax reports spread across his desk. The numbers blurred together. They always did these days.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Joe, it's Father Benedict."

Joe straightened in his chair. The priest rarely called without reason. "Father. What can I do for you?"

"I know this is short notice, but I'm in the neighborhood. I was wondering if I could stop by."

Something in Benedict's tone made Joe flinch. Too casual. Too careful.

"Sure, Father. No one's home but me. Come on over."

A pause. "Can I bring a friend?"

Joe's hand gripped the phone tighter. "Sure. Who is it?"

"Spes Nostra Salve."

The Latin phrase hit Joe like cold water. Hail Our Hope. The code phrase Benedict used when dealing with someone in crisis, someone contemplating suicide.

Joe closed his eyes. Breathed deep.

"Yes, Father. Bring them with you. I'll do whatever I can."

He hung up. Stared at the phone.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang.

Joe opened the door to find Father Benedict on his front step, his black coat buttoned against the December cold. Behind him stood another figure, head down, shoulders hunched, a faded Red Sox cap pulled low.

"Joe," Benedict said quietly. "Thank you for seeing us."

"Of course." Joe stepped aside. "Come in."

The two men entered. Joe studied the second man as he shuffled past – nineteen maybe, wearing clothes that had seen better days. Work boots held together with duct tape. Jeans stiff with dirt. A sharp smell of industrial disinfectant mixed with the sour odor of someone who'd slept in their clothes too many nights in a row.

The man kept his head down. His hands trembled at his sides.

Father Benedict closed the door. The sound echoed through the quiet house.

"Joe," Benedict said. "This is Jake. He wanted to meet with you."

The man slowly lifted his head. Removed his cap.

Joe had seen car-accident victims who looked in better condition. The scarring was severe. Surgical repairs had only partially succeeded. Jake's face was like a map of trauma and botched

reconstruction, with mismatched skin grafts and bones that hadn't healed properly, creating a face that must have made onlookers avert their eyes.

But the eyes. Blue-green. Distinctive.

Joe knew those eyes.

"Mister Callahan," the man said, "Do you remember me? I met you here once. With Evie."

The name landed like a physical blow.

Joe stumbled back a step. His mind raced. That arrogant kid who'd come to the house. The one who'd made his skin crawl. The one Evie had been so nervous around.

"Jake Morrison," Joe breathed.

"Yes, sir."

Joe looked at Father Benedict. The priest's expression was grave. Watchful.

"Jake has gone through some changes since you first met," Benedict said carefully. "Some good. Some bad. As you can see."

Joe forced himself to look at the scarred face again. Same eyes. Same build. But everything else was off. This wasn't the rich kid who'd walked through his door last year. This was something broken. Something beaten down by life.

"Why?" Joe's voice came out strangled. "Why are you here?"

Jake's hands clenched into fists. Released. Clenched again. His breathing was shallow, rapid.

"Mr. Callahan, I don't know how to say this." Jake's voice cracked. "But I'm so sorry for what happened to Evie. And I know it was my fault."

"Evie said you had guns in the house," Jake continued, words spilling out now like a confession. "So... if you want, go get one and end this for me. Please. I can't—I can't carry this anymore."

Joe felt his knees go weak. He gripped a chair to steady himself.

The words refused to come out. His throat constricted. His mind flooded with a thousand emotions: rage, grief, and confusion, but he couldn't form any coherent speech.

He looked at Father Benedict. A silent plea. *Help me. Tell me what to do. Tell me what to say.*

Fr. Benedict stepped forward. Placed himself slightly between Joe and Jake.

"Joe," he said gently. "I know this must be hard to hear. Jake came to the chapel yesterday. I almost didn't let him in." He paused. "But God knew I had to. I realized who he was. I knew he was the one you'd told me about."

Joe's chest heaved. He was trying to breathe normally. Trying not to let the rage take over.

"I told Jake he needed to meet with you," Benedict continued. "That he couldn't find peace without facing what he'd done."

Jake was weeping now. Silent tears ran down his ruined face, tracing the path of his scars. One caught on the ridge of scar tissue along his jaw.

"Mr. Callahan," "If I could, I would trade my life to bring her back. But I'm not... I'm not the same person you met." He gestured vaguely at his face. "I've been trying to change, but Evie's memory, her voice, follow me everywhere. I don't deserve to live after what I—"

His voice broke. He couldn't finish.

Joe stood frozen. Every instinct screamed at him to throw this broken man out of his house. To make him hurt the way Evie had hurt.

But something held him back.

Maybe it was the way Jake's hands trembled. Maybe it was the scars - physical evidence that Jake had already been destroyed by his own choices. Maybe it was Fr. Benedict's steady presence.

Or maybe it was the memory of his own daughter, and what she would have wanted.

"No," Joe said finally, his voice rough.

Jake looked up, confused.

"No, I'm not going to get a gun. No, I'm not going to end this for you." Joe's voice gained strength. "You want the easy way out? You want me to play executioner so you don't have to do the hard work of living with what you did?"

"My daughter didn't get an easy way out," Joe continued. "She suffered. She fought her illness. She fought the cruelty you inflicted on her every day. And in one moment of despair, she made a decision that can never be undone."

Joe stepped closer. Jake didn't move.

"You want to honor her memory? Then you live. You wake up every morning and choose to be better than the person who tormented her. You help someone else who's suffering. You make sure no one else does what you did."

"I don't know if I can—"

"You will." Joe's voice was iron. "Because suicide is not an option. Not for you. Not after what it did to my family. You don't get to escape into the same darkness that took my daughter."

Fr. Benedict spoke quietly. "Joe, Jake confessed everything yesterday. Every cruelty. Every calculated move to push Evie toward breaking. He came here because I told him he had to face you. To tell you the truth. To accept whatever consequences came."

Joe looked at the priest, then back at Jake.

"The consequence," Joe said slowly, "is that you live. You carry this. And you use it to become someone who prevents this from happening to someone else."

Jake was openly weeping. "I don't deserve—"

"No, you don't," Joe cut him off. "But mercy isn't about deserving. My daughter taught me that." His voice cracked. "She wrote in her journal about wanting to be kind, even when people weren't kind to her. Even when you weren't kind to her."

Silence filled the room.

"I can't forgive you," Joe said finally. "Not yet. Maybe not ever. But I won't be the reason you give up. You want to make amends? Then live. Get help. Get treatment for whatever is eating at you. And when you're strong enough, you help the next kid who's being bullied. You stop the next Jake Morrison before he destroys the next Evie."

Jake nodded, unable to speak.

Fr. Benedict placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. "Suicide is not an option, Jake. Say it."

"Suicide is not an option," Jake whispered.

Joe watched this broken young man repeat the words. Watched Fr. Benedict guide him like a father with a wounded son.

"There's a shelter," Fr. Benedict said. "St. Vincent's. They have counseling services. Medical help. I've already contacted them. Jake will be staying there starting tonight."

Joe nodded slowly. "Good."

Jake stood, replacing his Red Sox cap. "Mr. Callahan, I... thank you. For not—"

"Don't thank me," Joe said. "Just live, try to help your friends, and try to grow in holiness."

The two men left. Joe stood at the window, watching them walk to Fr. Benedict's car. Watching Jake, bent and broken, get into the passenger seat.

When they drove away, Joe sat down heavily on the couch.

He had just done the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

He had chosen mercy over vengeance.

He couldn't save his daughter. But maybe he'd just saved someone else's son.

Father Benedict walked up the aisle in the chapel, lighting candles on the altar. His daily preparation ritual for the morning mass.

The morning light came through the stained glass, painting the wooden pews in colors that didn't exist in the ordinary world. Red and gold and blue. The colors of suffering and glory and hope.

Outside, somewhere in the waking city, a girl named Mary Hope answered another phone line. Another voice in the darkness, choosing to reach out instead of letting go, choosing to stay.

Father Benedict made the sign of the cross and whispered the ancient prayer:

Spes nostra salve.

Hail, Our Hope.

Mary, the Blessed Mother, who leads us to salvation.

Mary Hope, who leads the suffering back to life.

THE END

RESOURCES:

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, suicidal thoughts, or emotional abuse, help is available:

Crisis Support:

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text, 24/7)**
- **Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741**
- **SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-4357 (substance abuse and mental health)**

Mental Health Support:

- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): 1-800-950-6264 | www.nami.org**
- **Mental Health America: www.mhanational.org**
- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America: www.adaa.org**

Veterans:

- **Veterans Crisis Line: 988, then press 1 | www.veteranscrisisline.net**

Spiritual Resources:**Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel**

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

Prayer of St. Gertrude; From her book, *The Herald of Divine Love***St. Gertrude's Unlimited Confidence**

Blind trust in God's mercy, unlimited confidence in His love, is one of the secrets to obtain sanctity. The Holy Fathers have always taught that the measure of our hope and confidence is the measure which we receive from heaven. They have realized that, through our undeserved confidence, God is most honored and glorified. Nothing will be denied to an unlimited confidence. Our Lord revealed: "It is impossible that anyone should not receive all that he has believed and hoped to obtain. It gives Me real pleasure when men hope great things from Me and I will always grant them more than they expect."

Saint Gertrude understood that confidence is the key which opens the treasuries of the infinite mercy of God. To her, she attributed all that she received, and she invited all to place boundless confidence in our Savior in order to receive from Him immeasurable graces. "All that I have received," she affirmed, "I owe to my confidence in the gratuitous bounty of God." Yes, Gertrude knew that Jesus is an infinite Treasure placed by the Eternal Father at the disposition of all, and that it is His supreme delight, as Savior, to distribute His gifts to those who trust in Him. He frequently complained to the beloved of His Heart of Man's want of confidence.

Another prayer from St. Gertrude's book:

During the winter after Our Lord's first visit, she found this very beautiful prayer in honor of His Passion.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, grant that I may aspire towards Thee with my whole heart, with yearning desire and with thirsting soul, seeking only Thy sweetness and Thy delights, so that my whole mind and all that is within me may ardently sigh to Thee, who art our true Beatitude."

"O most merciful Lord, engrave Thy wounds upon my heart with Thy most Precious Blood, that I may read in them both Thy grief and Thy love; and that the memory of Thy Wounds may ever remain in my inmost heart, to excite my compassion for Thy sufferings and to increase in me Thy love. Grant also that I may despise all creatures, and that my heart may delight in Thee alone. Amen."

Prayer to Our Mother of Sorrows by St. Bridget

O Blessed Virgin Mary, immaculate Mother of God, who didst endure a martyrdom of love and grief, beholding the sufferings and sorrows of Jesus, thou didst co-operate in the benefit of my redemption by thy innumerable afflictions and by offering to the Eternal Father His only-begotten Son as a holocaust and victim of propitiation for my sins. I thank thee for the unspeakable love which led thee to deprive thyself of the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus the true God and true Man, to save me, a sinner. Oh! make use of the unfailing intercession of thy holy sorrows with the Father and the Son, that I may steadfastly amend my life and never again crucify my loving Redeemer by new sins; and that, persevering till death in His grace, I may obtain eternal life through the merits of His Cross and Passion. Amen. Mother of love, of sorrow, and of mercy, pray for us.

Ind. of 300 days each time.

An angel revealed to St. Bridget that if our Lord had not miraculously sustained His Mother, she could not possibly have survived her martyrdom.

Imprimatur W.F. Cousins, Archbishopric of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

'Spes Nostra Salve' Is a title for the Blessed Mother, meaning 'Hail Our Hope.'

Note from the Author:

This story explores difficult themes through the lens of faith and community. The characters' journeys reflect their own experiences and should not be seen as the only path to healing. Professional mental health care, medication, therapy, and spiritual support can all play important roles in recovery. If you're struggling, please reach out. You are not alone.

"God willing, this novel will become a feature film.

We're seeking collaborators, advisors, and benefactors who understand what's at stake.

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