

LIVING PROOF

By Robert Gately

Based on a True Story as told by Jerry Gaughan

(93 pages, double spaced, 12 gony, New Time Roman, 25,240 words)

PREFACE

It's been about 20 years since I started working on "Living Proof", so I forget some of the details. To my best recollection, I had already finished three of my other scripts before I was asked to act in a Temple University project that was produced by a person the film industry whom I became good friends with at the time. His assistant, Christopher Reynolds, suggested I contact Jerry and see if he would be amenable to having me write his story in a screenplay format. I was given Jerry's attempt on writing the screenplay version of his story, and my hat goes off to him for doing it. However, it needed work and I don't think Chris, or anyone in that organization, were going to do anything with it without new version. So, I told the crew that I would contact Jerry, and I did.

As it turned out, Jerry was looking for someone who could draft a professional copy of his work and the project became a doable one if I had the time. It just so happened, I did have the time, so I pursued the venture and, much to my surprise, I became enamored with the storyline, not so much because Jerry was adopted – that certainly had something to do with it - but because he was a semi-pro hockey player.

I was just coming off revising 'Hat Trick', which was a football themed story, a bucket list kind-of story before 'bucket list' became entrenched in everyone's vernacular. But it was about football, and I felt it was a natural progression to pursue Jerry's story since it was about hockey. And, by the way, just before Hat Trick, I wrote another story, a Longest Yard kind-of story, only it was basketball. So, I must thank Jerry for providing me with a kind of continuity at the time. My work on the script certainly added a happy ending to my sporting pursuits in writing, and it allowed me to explore other avenues of other writing endeavors.

Thanks to Jerry, I became more entrenched in the sport of Ice Hockey, and for the first

time in my life Ice Hockey has become a sporting activity that I enjoyed very much watching. I still can't skate worth a hill of beans, though.

In any event, I started this project a long time ago. My records show that the Writer's Guild approved my application in 2002. My efforts recently to write a novella, based on the facts of the screenplay, resurrected feelings long lost due to the passage of time. The effort in producing a novella of *Living Proof*, based on the storyline of the screenplay, provided me with the knowledge that the screenplay itself needed some edits. So, I did them right after I wrote the novella, and I presented the 'new' feature script to Jerry. The screenplay is as tight as it can be and is now my shortest (of ten) feature scripts at 96 pages.

I hope whoever picks up this book will enjoy it. I have to go now and edit another project.

CHAPTER ONE

PJ Gallagher was sitting at a table in an elegant reception hall in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Master of Ceremonies (MC) was in mid-speech at the podium. The MC appeared to be reading from notes, but he raised his head, as if he was about to recite the following statement by memory: “This year's OPUS award,” he began, “was won by an unusual man; not the typical writer who has won in past years.”

As the MC talked, a handsome PJ Gallagher fidgeted with a Tau Cross that dangled from his neck. He looked off into the distance and began to reminisce as the MC spoke.

“This year's winner doesn't make a living writing,” the MC said. “He lives in small town right outside of Pittsburgh ...”

As the MC voice faded, PJ experienced a daydream that brought him to the Greensburg Hockey Arena. In the announcer's booth, Brent, one of the announcers, sat calmly calling the game while the other announcer, Phil, looked through his binoculars.

“Whoa. Did you see that, Phil? Malecki is like a bulldozer tonight. Unless the Badgers can control him, they're gonna lose another championship.”

Malecki, a bulky, aggressive player from Greensburg, checked a Badger, one of PJ's teammates, and stole the puck.

“Gallagher just finished his shift,” Announcer Phil said, “But I can tell he wants back in there. He wants a piece of Malecki real bad.”

While PJ sat on the bench for a breather, he shouted encouragement to his teammates

while Coach Flanagan, silver-haired, slapped the banister as a whistle blew and offsides was called by the referee. The Coach patted PJ on the shoulder. “Switch” he yelled out. PJ tucked his Tau Cross in his sweater, hopped the boards, and entered the game.

On the other side of the arena Coach Thomas, dark-haired, and about a decade younger than Coach Flanagan, yelled words of encouragement to his Greensburg players. He looked up at the scoreboard that displayed HOME 4 VISITORS 2. Also, a banner floated in the rafters nearby stating the title match of the game: *Western Conference Championship Game 7*.

On the ice, PJ skated in circles while the referee hustled the players for a face-off. He looked up at the clock. Two-and-a-half minutes remained in the game.

“It would be nice if the Badgers could win one championship,” Announcer Brent said. “How many times has Gallagher been in this spot?”

“Six or seven times,” Announcer Phil said, “but who's counting?”

“And he’s never won a championship. That’s gotta hurt. You are the go-to player all year long, and when it really counts.... Never won the trophy.”

In the stands, Doris and William Gallagher, PJ’s parents, who are pushing the limits of middle age, and Father Felix, PJ’s Uncle, that is, his mother’s brother, cheered loudly but to no avail. Tom and Phil, PJ’s brothers, were also in the stands. Just as Tom told his dad that Malecki was getting away with murder, Malecki viciously checked Steve Carlson into the boards.

“I know, son,” William replied. “Your brother has been turtling around him this whole period.”

“It's the last game of the championship series,” Father Felix said, so I guess they’re

reluctant to blow the whistle. An infraction tonight must be flagrant.

“Come on, Uncle Felix,” Tom said. “The zebras have lost control of the game. Period. End of story.”

“You can't have hockey opinions with them, Felix,” Doris said. “Don't even try.”

A face-off resulted in PJ getting the puck. He spotted Steve Carlson, also a Badger, who came skating closed by the glass where PJ's family was sitting.

“Down the lane,” PJ shouted.

“No,” Steve said. “We haven't tried the shuffle yet. Give me the puck. I'll draw in Malecki, and then pass it to you.”

As PJ skates down the ice, he passed off to Steve, but Malecki picked Steve up and slammed him on the boards before he could pass, and the puck wobbled loose as a result.

Jeff Carlson, another Badger player, picked the puck up and passed it to PJ who scored. The Badger fans went wild. The score now read HOME 4, VISITORS 3. The Badger players swarmed PJ as Coach Thomas called a time out.

As PJ returned to the bench, he looked up in the stands and nodded to Father Felix who clasped his hands and gave PJ an over the shoulder celebratory gesture. “One more,” Father Felix said to those around him. “A tie sends it into overtime.”

On the ice, PJ skated in circles until the referee was ready to start the action. He looked up in the stands again at his family, and drew strength from them.

Coach Thomas yelled instructions to the team, and then sent his players back on the ice. He pulled Malecki to the side. “What was that move against Carlson?” he asked,

“I was going for the puck,” Malecki said.

Thomas pulled Malecki close and growled in his ear. “Take Gallagher out. You hear?”

Take him out. Without him they can't score, not even on a power play.”

The coach pushed Malecki back on the ice and clapped as if it were business as usual.

Back on the ice, play resumed and before long, it was one-on-one between PJ and Malecki. Malecki rammed PJ into the boards, and the Tau Cross ripped from PJ's neck and fell to the ice. A Greensburg player kicked it into the boards while PJ went down hard and Malecki's knee pounded his jaw for good measure. PJ lay there, unconscious.

The game winded down to its finish and, after a minute or two, when everyone left, there was just one person in the press box, a reporter, David Hansen who was busy typing away at his computer, disregarded the noise the Zamboni was making as it was cleaning up the ice rink. As it approached the Tau Cross, the Zamboni gobbled it up into its belly and that particular Tau Cross would never be seen again.

CHAPTER TWO

Father Felix sat bedside at the hospital and PJ read the sports page while he was lying in bed. PJ tossed the paper at his feet, exposing the front page of the sport's page which had a large caricature of PJ hanging from a rope choking while standing on a chair, and ready to jump. A championship cup by his feet had wings and was flying away.

PJ had dislocated his jaw. Although the headband he was wearing impeded his speech, the doctor ordered it for him to keep his jaw still. However, it could not keep him from mumbling his words through his clenched teeth.

"I don't believe I've ever seen you so quiet. Cat caught your tongue?" Father Felix said, then laughed.

"Very funny," PJ mumbled.

"Hey, Listen," Father Felix said, then pointed to the paper and added, "You don't need a lousy article to throw you into a pity party. You do a very good job of that yourself without anyone's help." Then Father Felix added, "The Penguins are nuts if they don't bring you up next year. See how you do for a couple of years with the big boys, you know?"

PJ felt around his neck and noticed his Tau Cross was missing. He mumbled something and groaned.

"Lost your cross, huh?" Father Felix said. "Here, take mine." He took off his Tau Cross from his neck and, as he placed it around PJ's neck, he said, "Don't lose this one. It's two-hundred-and-fifty years old."

Just as he said this PJ's family appeared. Father Felix got up and leaned into PJ a little and whispered, "I'll pray your recovery is slow. You can learn a lot with a closed mouth."

“Felix. Stay,” William said. “What’s two hundred and fifty years old?”

“My Tau Cross. I got it as a gift when I became a monk. PJ lost his.”

PJ made a ‘thank you’ gesture with his hands tapping his heart.

“I’d love to stay,” Father Felix said, “but have a fund raiser to go to, William. UG! I hate those.” Father Felix said his good-byes, and left just as a good-looking, slender nurse entered with a chart under her arm.

“How is everyone today?” the nurse asked.

Everyone nodded and gave a ‘thumbs up’ sign that all was okay, except for PJ and Tom.

“I was feeling lousy until now,” Tom said.

The nurse turned to the only other female in the room. “Are you family?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m his mother.” She head nodded to William and introduced him and her two other sons, Tom and Phil. Tom eyed the nurse, then nudged Phil. Doris eyed Tom. The message was clear: ‘Behave yourself’.

The nurse gave a rough cough, then added, “I need to ask some questions for you guys, and for Mr. Gallagher, if you don’t mind.”

“You can call him PJ,” Tom said.

“What does the P stand for?” she asked.

“Patrick,” PJ said.

“Okay. If there needs to be any talking, we will let your family answer them, okay, Patrick? Between your concussion and your dislocated jaw, I don’t want to bother you too much. Just nod your head ‘yes’ or shake your head for ‘no’. And if there needs to be any clarification, we’ll let your family talk.”

PJ nodded.

This led to her asking a series of questions of whether PJ was allergic to any medicines. Finally, she asked, “does he or anyone in the family have heart trouble or high blood pressure?”

Doris looked at William who shrugged his shoulders.

Seeing that his parents weren't about to volunteer any family information, Tom piped in and said, “We're all adopted, including PJ.”

The nurse chuckled, not realizing Tom was serious.

“Very funny,” the nurse said. “But I have to ask these questions.”

“It's true, nurse,” Doris said. “All my sons are adopted. We don't know much about PJ's family history. From either birth-parent, I'm afraid, because he's adopted and we're not in contact with the birth parents.”

“Oh. Well. That's okay,” the nurse said.

“He's a hypochondriac, if that helps,” Phil said.

“And he gets hemorrhoids because he sits on his butt so much,” Tom added.

Doris shot a look at her son to shut up. The nurse just smiled and left.

Tom picked up the paper and after a couple of seconds of reading he said, “This is libelous, PJ. It says here that you're a has-been who never could win the big games.”

William tore the paper out of Tom's hands.

“Dad, you spent good money for me to be a lawyer,” Tom said. “Believe me, we can sue and win.”

“You're an idiot,” William said.

William threw the paper into the garbage. “It's a sleazebag paper, anyway.”

“You retired from the Butler Gazette, Dad,” Phil said. “How can you say that?”

“Yeah. Well, it wasn't a sleazebag paper when I worked on it. It's different working in the

Ad department, today. Being a reporter is a different story. Back when I was a reporter we had more freedom. Today, reporters are piranhas trying to duck the checks and balances to protect the public. They sound right, but they lead the reader astray. And people love to read misinformation if it is volatile and nasty. Reporters would sell their mothers in a heartbeat if they could get a scoop on a hot, nasty, news item.”

“The Gazette happens to be my employer now,” Phil said, “So, watch what you say.”

“You work in the advertising department. That's different.”

“What ... different. I'm not reporting the news, is that what you mean?”

Phil waited for an answer but none was given. “I know I'm not a writer like you were, Dad,” he said. “What are you suggesting?”

“I'm not suggesting anything, Phil. Working in the advertising division is ... different. That's all.”

“Please. Will you all stop it,” Doris pleaded. “Can't you see that you're upsetting PJ?” PJ rolled his eyes just as the doctor walked in.

“Hello, I'm Doctor Almquist.” The Doctor nodded to everyone in the room, then faced PJ.

“Find another occupation, PJ,” the Doctor said. “Something less physical.”

“Yeah, right!” PJ mumbled through his clenched teeth.

The Doctor gave PJ a very serious deadpan stare.

“I'm okay,” PJ said. “I'll be fine.”

“Why, Doctor?” Doris asked. “Why should he change vocations?”

“It's not his jaw I'm worried about. It's been dislocated before and he'll recover from that real quick. We'll give him a Baron's Bandage when he is discharged to help stabilize his jaw,

and he'll look like he's been in a street fight and got the worst of it, but he'll be talking up a storm in no time. I'm more concerned about his brain. He's had three concussions in two years. This is not good."

Tom, Phil, and William looked at each other with concern.

"What about Dickerson," Tom said. "He's the leading scorer in the NHL this year, and he's working on his eighth concussion."

The doctor gave Tom a deadpan stare and said, "Did you ever hear Dickerson talk? He mumbles his words because his brain doesn't work."

Then he turned to PJ and told him that the next time he was hit hard in the head that he may never get up again. That was the only message he wanted to give, so he left the family to reflect on his parting words. After a few seconds of silence, PJ mumbled, "I can't quit now."

Doris threw a look to William who quickly looked away. She then looked to her two other sons who also looked away. Just then, PJ girlfriend, Lauren, walked in.

Tom immediately told Lauren about PJ's dislocated jaw and what the doctor just said.

PJ's Mom slumped in a chair close by and massaged her temples as if nursing a migraine.

"The doctor recommended that PJ quit hockey," Tom said. "That's why the long faces."

"That reminds me of a joke," William said.

"No," Doris yelled out. "If I hear that horse joke one more time, I'll punch you in the solar plexus right here and now." That was enough to keep William silent.

Lauren leaned down and gave PJ a gentle nudge.

"Talk some sense into him, will you please, Lauren?" Doris said. "I love hockey too, but I love him more."

“I have no power over PJ, Doris, when it comes to hockey. I don’t think anyone does.”

Lauren then turned to PJ and asked, “Have you asked them?”

PJ shook his head.

“Asked us what?” Doris wanted to know.

PJ pointed to his jaw. He mumbled unintelligibly then pointed to Lauren for help.

“PJ wants to move out of his place and move back in with you guys,” Lauren said. “Then when I come back from France ...”

“France?” Doris yelled out. Her stern look at PJ forced him to mumble and point to his head indicating that he forgot to tell her.

“I’m going to France on an exchange program with two of my students,” Lauren said.

“Really?” Doris said. “That’s great, Lauren.”

“Yeah,” Lauren agreed. “I’ll get my Master’s from this, too. I’m leaving next January, but I’ll only be gone for four months.” She looked at PJ, then back to Doris. “I don’t believe PJ didn’t tell you, so I’ll tell you,” Lauren said. “We’re going to move in together in an apartment when I get back.”

Tom and Phil raised their eyebrows to each other - afraid to be the ones who break the silence.

“Wow! A commitment like that takes courage?” Doris said. “Did you hear that, William?”

“That’s nice, PJ,” Doris said, not really meaning it. “Of course, you can stay with us until ... then.”

“Yes,” William chimed in. “You can give me a break and do the lawn if the weather is nice, or rake the leaves.”

Doris may have seemed calm, but her face showed a different story. She was, after all, a very religious person and the act of Lauren and PJ moving in together was something she didn't want to hear. She rubbed her temples and moaned as if she wanted to be teleported to another universe.

In the Gallagher's living room, the front door was held wide open by a welcome mat to let PJ come and go as he brought in his 'stuff' from a U-Haul that was parked in the driveway which was being used to transfer his belongings from the apartment.

PJ brought in a box and walked upstairs with it, then repeated the act a few more times before William walked in with a chair. PJ could talk normally now, although he talked a lot slower. "One more box," PJ said to his father. "I'll get it later."

"Thanks for the help," PJ said as he hugged his father, then they both walked into the kitchen where Doris was making sandwiches. They sat across from each other at the kitchen table and Doris served both of them. After a long period of silence, PJ piped in, "Okay, you guys. What's the matter? You've been giving me the silent treatment all day."

PJ stared at his parents. No one seemed to want to talk.

"Okay," Doris said breaking the ice. "You asked, so I'll tell you. We love Lauren, PJ, but we don't like it that you're moving in with her before you get married.

"Too many marriages end up in divorce," PJ said, "because people don't know what they're getting into. That's all. Let it go, Mom. That's why I didn't want to say anything because I knew you'd give me a hard time about it." PJ bit into his sandwich, and chewed slowly. He held his jaw, then shook off the pain. "I'm not moving in with her until after the playoffs," he said. "That's almost a year from now."

“William? A little help here.”

“What can I say?” William said. “A lot could happen in a year. Besides, her biological clock is ticking. Got any mustard?”

Doris sat as William got up and opened the refrigerator.

“Okay. I'm not going to nag you anymore about this, but ... but,” Doris couldn't finish the sentence.

So, PJ helped her. “You'll pray for my soul,” he said. “Good. I love you too, Mom,”

While William spread the mustard on his sandwich, he said, “The Penguins haven't called you up, and you're not getting any younger. Can't be distributing newspapers all your life, you know.”

“What is it with you guys?” PJ yelled. He whistled out a couple of deep breaths as if he was having a Zen moment. “Maybe I'm feeling a little 'off' because of that Hansen caricature in the paper.” PJ looked at Doris and William for a response. Finally, William threw PJ a shrug.

“Listen,” PJ said, “I know you guys want me to quit, but hockey is all I know. I'm starting to feel something's wrong with me, okay. They're just feelings. There's nothing cerebral about them.”

“Alfred Adler was asked once to sum up his many years of study on human nature in one sentence. Know what he said?”

“Yes, Dad. We know what Alfred Adler said.”

He said, “To be human is to feel inferior”

“Yeah, well he must've examined a lot of hockey players.”

“I don't think they had hockey when he was around.” PJ then pointed to his head.

“Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm just being human.”

Doris patted PJ's arm as she got up from the table, "Well, you do what you need to do," she said. "Go talk to my brother. Uncle Felix is good at these kind of things."

PJ fidgets in bed, dreaming. The digital alarm on the bedroom night table displayed 3:18 AM in its window. The alarm went off and PJ bolted up, sweaty. He shut the alarm off and fell back on the bed with a thud. Reluctantly, he finally got up.

PJ pulled up to a convenience store in a newspaper distribution truck, jumped out, walked to the rear of the truck and opened the back door. He retrieved a newspaper bundle and tossed it by the store door and repeated the process with two other bundles, and then got back in the truck and drove off to the next stop.

William was sanding a piece of furniture in his garage. The cell phone rang, so he answered it. It was Philip.

"Hi, Dad. It's your favorite son," he said.

"Tom," William said, "What's up?"

"Very funny. Ha. Ha. It's Philip, Dad."

"Ha. Ha. I knew it was you. Tom never calls me."

PJ pulled into the driveway just as Phil said, "Listen, Dad. I got some news that's going to knock your socks off."

Moments later PJ walked in the house with a paper and slapped it down on the kitchen table. He poured himself a cup of coffee and tasted it. He has had better.

William stormed in from the garage and said, "You're not going to believe this. Coach

Thomas has been fired as the Greensburg Coach, and is going to be the new coach of the Badgers.”

PJ sat down at the kitchen table, deflated. “That means Malecki is coming with him.”

“Yes.”

“That means Malecki is going to be a Badger? That’s such great news,” he said sarcastically.

William sat with PJ and told him that he didn’t like Thomas as much as anyone. William didn’t trust him. But according to William, as one door slams on you, another one opens.

“Maybe it's time to look for a new occupation,” William said.

“Don't start, Dad,” PJ fired back.

“In high school you had plans to be a journalist. Maybe I can ...”

“Dad! Please! YOU had those plans for me.”

“Son, you were ... excuse me, you ARE a good writer, and you were a good writer in school. I remember ...”

“What I remember about school is you taking a red pencil to all of my work.”

“Yes, and you responded by becoming a good writer. You were, you are, a good writer.”

“Do you remember the award I won in seventh grade? I had to pick a book and do a report. It was bad enough that you picked the book ...”

“Moby Dick is a classic.”

“You had me revise it over and over until I got a blister on one of my fingers. You had so many red pencil marks on the paper, I couldn't read the text.”

“It was a first draft. Everyone's first draft gets chewed up. Besides, you won the contest, didn't you? So, don’t exaggerate.”

“You won the contest, you mean. It wasn't my paper after I made the corrections. It was yours.” PJ waited for a second or two to let that statement sink in, but it became obvious that his father wasn't going to respond, so PJ added, “Dad, you wanted me to be a writer so bad that I lost the desire to become one.” PJ got up from the table and left, leaving William alone and deep in thought.

The front door to the house opened and slammed shut.

“But you were a good writer,” William said.

Father Felix was trimming the hedges in front of the Friary as PJ pulled up and parked his car nearby. PJ got out of the car and walked over to a nearby bench, and sat and waited. That signaled Father Felix to stop clipping and he walked over to the bench and joined PJ.

Pigeons cooing nearby broke a long silence. Finally, Father Felix looked at the sky and said, “What a beautiful day today.” There was another long silence before Father Felix added, “I heard about Thomas and Malecki becoming Badgers. Are you threatened?”

“It's not that, Uncle Felix. It's my dad. He wants me to change occupations in the height of my illustrious career.” He forced a laugh, then said, “And your sister's putting a lot of pressure on me to quit hockey.”

“Yeah, parents are like that. Safety first. That kind of thing.”

“You've seen me play for a lot of years, Uncle Felix. Do I choke during the big games?”

“I don't know if you'd call it choking, PJ. But I've noticed that when the game is close you don't pass as much.”

PJ leaned back as Uncle Felix gifted him a few seconds to let him think about what he just said. “You don't do it consciously, I'm sure. If I were to guess, I'd say it seems you don't

trust your teammates when the game is close. I mean, what the hell do I know? Nobody knows anything in this crazy world.”

“No. You're right, Father.”

Some pigeons flew down close to them. Father Felix took some food from his pocket and tossed it to them. “Now, don't get me wrong. You play with great intensity, which is good, PJ, but you play as if the outcome rests on your shoulders alone. Sometimes you're less productive because of that. So, hopefully you'll be able to share the spotlight with Malecki. It's just what the team needs right now. Shake things up a bit.”

“Maybe I should move on,” PJ said.

Father Felix laughed, and then said, “I think everyone would be happy if you quit. Hey, I'm not going to discourage you to move on. If you want to move on, go ahead. But do it for the right reasons, not because of constructive criticism, or because someone drew a caricature of you choking during a critical game.”

A pigeon came up to them. Father Felix turned his pocket inside out and the pigeon walked away as if it knew Father Felix had no more food.

“A new occupation is not going to correct your attitude. They call that a geographic cure, I think.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You're stuck, is what I'm saying. You feel poorly about yourself. ‘Oh, I got socked in the jaw. Poor me. Malecki hates my guts. Poor me. I'm adopted. Poor me.’”

“Stop, Uncle Felix.”

“My birth parents didn't want me. Poor, poor, pour me another drink.”

“STOP! Why are you doing this?” PJ said, bolting off the bench. “What the hell is the

matter with you? The only thing I ever wanted to do in life was play hockey. The only goal I ever had was to be a NHL player. And it's only recently that I've realized why I wanted to succeed so much. Be a star.”

Father Felix waited for the answer.

“So I could show my birth parents that they shouldn't've dumped me, if I knew who they were, that is.”

Father Felix got up, put his arm around PJ and said, “Feeling lousy about things are we. Don't fret. It's like looking into the sun, PJ. It's not good if you to fixate on it for too long. I mean, you look up at it and you're happy that it's a sunny day, but you put sun cream on you because you know too much sun is not good for you.”

“What are you trying to say, Uncle Felix.”

“Maybe there's more to life than trying to impress people who don't measure success the way you do.”

PJ quietly reflected what Father Felix just said. Not knowing how to respond, PJ just said, “Maybe I'm bipolar. Maybe I need lithium, or something.”

“Oh, good grief! Somebody please shoot me.” Father Felix looks skyward. “Dear, God. Please let us understand your prophet Euripides when he said there is, in the worst of fortune, the best of chances for a happy change.”

Father Felix picked up his clippers and worked the hedges again. PJ took the rake and began sweeping the clippings. “Euripides? I never heard of him,” PJ said.

“He wasn't a prophet, really,” Father Felix said. “He was an ancient Greek poet. He wrote ninety-two plays. Wasn't appreciated much during his day by the Athenian crowd. Refused to condone their moral hypocrisy. However, he was a good man. That's what makes him so

notable.”

PJ chuckled, and then said, “Forever, the teacher.”

CHAPTER THREE

The whole Gallagher family, and Lauren, were in the dining room at the dinner table having a conversation while waiting to eat. The conversation bounced around from the weather to sports to the news of the day, while Doris was busying herself getting dinner ready in the kitchen. Phil got up and went into the kitchen and asked if she needed any help.

“The meat's about done,” she said. “You can get it out for me and bring it in the dining room.”

Phil took the pot holders, retrieved the ham and brought it out to the dining room, set it on the table and went back into the kitchen. “So, what's going on with PJ? Is he okay,” he asked.

“I think so. Why?”

“He's asking a lot of questions which he should've asked a long time ago.”

“About his birth parents, you mean?”

“Yeah. Remember when Tom and I went through that stage in Grammar School? When I started to see a lot of hair in my brush ... 'Is it hereditary? Am I going bald? Is my birth father bald?' Remember? I went nuts for a while back then.”

“You're still nuts. No offense.”

“None taken, but thanks. And when I told Tom he was a product of inbreeding? My God! He went crazy trying to find out who his birth-parents were. Remember?”

“Yes. I remember. That wasn't very nice of you. Tom searched the internet night and day. He got physically ill because he didn't get his sleep. Shame on you.”

“However, PJ never cared about that. All he cared about was hockey. And now he's having dreams.”

“Dreams? I didn’t know that.”

“Oh, I forgot! He told me not to tell you and Dad. I didn't say anything. Dreams? What dreams?”

“Phil. Just tell me. Please.”

“His birth mother? A real doozy, according to his dreams. She threw PJ's father away like a stale hot dog. She didn't even tell him she was pregnant. In his dream, I mean.”

Doris peeked into the dining room. Everyone was talking, laughing, and enjoying the moment with each other.

“All right. Let's stop this talk. Dinner is done. Don't tell your father about this. He'll just get riled up.” She handed the potholders to Phil. “Go. Make yourself useful,” she said.

Phil and Doris walked in with the other food interrupting the chatter. They sat at the table with the rest of the family. Doris tapped the table and nodded to William. Everyone bowed their heads.

“Dear Lord,” William said. “We gather today on this special occasion to honor a woman whom we all love and cherish. We thank you for her, and may we prove to be worthy of her love. Amen. Oh, and thank you for this food which we are about to eat. Amen.”

PJ raises his glass. “To the best Mom in the world. Happy Mother's Day.”

With that, everyone grabbed their glasses and toasted Doris. After that, a hockey conversation resumed.

Doris leaned into Lauren and whispered. “I hope you like hockey. That’s all they talk about around here.”

“I like tennis better,” Lauren said.

“That'll be our little secret.”

Later, after dinner, a half-finished pumpkin pie sat in front of William while he rubbed his stomach and complimented Doris on the meal. After a few 'here, here' remarks, PJ went in for a second slice.

Table talk was currently on football. Half the table thought Terry Bradshaw was a better quarterback than Tom Brady, and half the table thought the reverse was true even though they were Steeler fans. Once the stats were produced, the Bradshaw fans at the table said it was a different time back when Bradshaw was throwing. Maybe it was harder because quarterbacks back then didn't have the 'good' receivers quarterbacks had today. Besides, Bradshaw fans thought that if he had the receivers Tom Brady had, there would be no argument who was better.

Doris got up and head-nodded to PJ to follow her into the kitchen. PJ took the cue and patted Lauren's arm as he gathered some plates and headed into the kitchen with Doris.

William apologized to Lauren for monopolizing the conversation and making it about football just as Tom yelled out, "Trivia question. Who was the 'Italian Stallion'? Think early Paterno."

Phil and William were about to answer but Lauren was quicker.

"That's easy," she said. "Franco Harris."

Everyone at the table were impressed.

However, in the kitchen, Doris started washing the dishes while PJ walked in.

"Phil tells me you're having dreams about your birth parents."

"Phil has a big mouth," PJ responded.

"Ooh. I wasn't supposed to say that. My bad."

PJ picked up a dish towel and silently began drying the dishes.

“What is going on, PJ? Something is not right. I can tell.”

“I don't know, Mom. Maybe it's a mid-life thing.”

“You're too young for that. You've always been sensitive. When you were ten, you cried when I ran over a bird accidentally. Remember that?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“I asked you why you were crying. You said you felt bad for the baby birds because they lost their mother. Then you discovered hockey.”

PJ chuckled. Scoffs almost.

“Ever since you were a freshman in high school, hockey has been your number one passion in life. No room for anything else. That's when you stopped crying about things.”

“Oh. I see. We're having one of those conversations.”

“It's Mother's Day. Indulge me,” Doris said. “So, the doctor tells you that you should give up hockey. You and Lauren are trying to forge a commitment. You move in with us. Sounds like a lot of stress to me.”

PJ looked at his mother with a glint of pride in his eye. “Very perceptive, Mom.” He waited a few seconds before saying anything else. “I guess the thought of doing something other than hockey has me thinking about whom I am and I ask myself what talents I have. What kind of husband or father will I be?”

“So you think you need to find your birth parents to find the answer to these questions?”

“This has no reflection on you or Dad. You're my parents. I love you. It's me. I am plagued by dreams of a wealthy woman who wants no part of me, and a father, a hockey player, who never knew I existed. I've become obsessed with this thought of finding my birth-parents, like I'm looking to find something that's wrong with me. Like ...”

“A genetic deficiency.”

“Maybe ... maybe. Yeah.”

William was standing by the entrance to the kitchen and heard most of the conversation. He walked in and interrupted, “So, you feel something's missing in your life, PJ. Something your ... adopted parents can't give you.”

“That's not what he said, William. Now don't start. Please! It's Mother's Day. Let's all of us keep it low on the Richter Scale today.”

“I'm just asking,” William said. “There's no harm in asking. Is there something your mother and I have failed to give you, son? Direction? An education? Love, perhaps?”

“Dad, I just want to know why they didn't want me. I want to know if my birth father knew. I always assumed he did. Maybe he didn't. That's a reasonable thing to ask, isn't it?”

“Reasonable?” William said. “I'll tell you what's reasonable. Gratitude. Gratitude for working ungodly hours so your children can go to college.”

“Are you saying that I don't care what you guys have done for me?” He turned to his mother, “You see why I don't like talking about this, Mom?” And then he turned to William and said, “Everything has to be about you. This is not about you, Dad. It's about me.”

“Why now, PJ?” his mother asked. “Why didn't you come to us when you first had these dreams.”

“I didn't want to hurt you or Dad.”

Doris turned and waved a spatula at William. “We always knew that PJ might want to find out who his birth parents are.”

“Fifteen years ago, maybe. But why now? This is just one big slap in the face.”

“I didn't want you guys to think I didn't love you or appreciate ...”

“BULL CRAP!” William yelled then left through the door to the garage.

The sound of the door slamming solicited a deep sigh from Doris.

“I knew this would happen,” PJ said.

“He's just a hothead. He'll be fine.”

PJ flopped in a kitchen chair. Doris wiped her hands on a towel and sat as well.

“Go to Catholic Charities where we got you, although I don't think they'll tell you anything because of their privacy policy rules.” Doris thought a bit and then said, “Get a copy of your original birth certificate from the Vital Statistics Office anyway. It should have your birth mother's name on it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

While PJ was driving Lauren home, he told her about the altercation he had with his parents; about his recent dreams of trying to find his birth parents.

“I'm not angry with you, PJ. But we're a couple, aren't we? You should've told me about your dreams when you started having them. You're not going to find another woman who loves you more than I do. So, go find your birth-parents and come to closure on that part of your life. But when I'm away think real hard what you want in your life and how I fit into it.”

PJ arrived at Lauren's apartment complex, pulled into a parking spot, turned the engine off, and slapped the wheel.

“Are you saying...”

“I'm not saying anything, PJ. Let's just get a good night sleep. It's been a long day.” She leaned into PJ and kissed him on the cheek. She touched his face tenderly, like she wanted to take the hurt away, but didn't know how. “I love you very much,” she said.

A tear in PJ's eye explained the lump in his throat and why he couldn't speak.

PJ was at work early in the morning as usual. He stopped by a mailbox and mailed an envelope to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, in Harrisburg. After work, he travelled to where Lauren taught, and dropped flowers off for her at the administration office.

From there he went back to the Gallagher house and found his father watering the flower bed. The front lawn needed a cut as well so he went to the shed and pulled out the power motor and began to mow the lawn while his father watered the flower bed with a hose. When PJ passed by him, William thanked his son for taking the initiative to mow the lawn.

As the summer progressed, PJ was cutting the lawn again, and William was watering the flower bed again. This time, however, when PJ passed by William, he turned the hose on PJ and squirted his son profusely. PJ immediately turned off the lawn mower and ran after his father.

As the summer waned, PJ showed his father a newspaper article with the headlines NEW BADGER COACH OPENS TRAINING CAMP TOMORROW. William nodded knowing this season would be like no other.

At the Badger's hockey stadium locker room, Jack, the assistant coach, tacked up a notice on the bulletin board. The notice said 'first come first serve on choice of lockers'. Most of the members of the team were present and had already picked their lockers. Steve Carlson pointed to the notice.

“What’s this, Jack?” he said.

“New coach. New rules,” was all Jack said.

Malecki entered, duffel bag in hand, loud and cocky, He walked up to the bulletin board and read the notice. “Which one is Gallagher's locker?” he yelled out to no one in particular.

“Twelve,” was yelled out by one of the players.

Malecki headed for locker twelve and greeted the Carlson brothers, STEVE and JEFF, and a few other players on the way with just grunts. Malecki found locker twelve and threw his stuff in it just as PJ sauntered in.

PJ drew an array of emotional greetings from his teammates. He noticed Malecki in front of his locker. PJ walked over to the Carlson Brothers and asked them what Malecki was doing in

front of his locker. Jeff told him it wasn't his locker anymore and to check the notice on the bulletin board.

“New rules, PJ,” Steve said.

PJ walked over to the board and read the notice. He queried Jack with a look. Jack responded with a shrug of his shoulders and the words, “New Coach, new rules.”

PJ swung his attention to Malecki who just sat on the bench close to his new locker. PJ found a locker close to Steve and began putting his stuff into it. Steve leaned into PJ and whispered, “I don't think Malecki has said a word to anyone yet. Careful, PJ. He's a mean one.”

Coach Thomas came out of his office “Hello, men,” Thomas said. “I'm your new coach. I like to be called Coach by my players. Coach Thomas by anyone else. I don't know what you've heard about me. It doesn't matter. You'll get to know me in short order. I'm not shy about getting in your face. You'll learn that real quick. I'm the kind of person who rewards players who produce and work hard. You're here because you're good hockey players. Being good doesn't mean that you'll win games. But you know that already, don't you? In case you didn't know, it's the smart skaters who win games, and you'll find me a very pleasing man if you win. Win, damn it. Just WIN!”

He paused and calmed down.

“I get carried away, sometimes. Anyway, winning is the most important thing in the world. It defines me as a coach and you as a player. Don't get caught caving in to the philosophy that it's how you play the game matters. Making it to the conference championship is what matters and is not something to boast about until you've won it. I'll give you an example, Green Bay won the Super Bowl in 2011. Does anyone know that but who lost that game? Steve, do you know.”

Steve just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“Anyone know the answer?” Everyone remained silent. “My point is, everyone knows the Packers won. The losers no one knows. Actually, it was the Steelers who lost that game. Anyway, I'm a win-at-all-cost kind-of guy, and the sooner you all integrate that into your daily thoughts and prayers, the better off you'll be. Questions?”

Everyone sat motionless, stunned almost, except for Malecki. He has obviously heard this speech before.

“Ok, then,” the Coach said. “Chop, Chop. Get dressed. Get on the ice. Let's see who'll play first line for me this year.”

While dressing, Steve yelled over to Malecki, “How did you do at the Penguin tryouts?”

“I'm here, aren't I?” was all Malecki said.

“You were the scoring leader last year in your conference,” Steven said. “And PJ was won his conference for the past few years and still hasn't been called up...makes you wonder what you have to do get on their roster.”

“They don't know squat,” Malecki said, as he got dressed.

To the side, away from Malecki, Jeff leaned into PJ and said, “Don't feel bad that you weren't called. The Penguins have too many forwards.”

As the players finished dressing, some of them moved out to the locker room. Jack dropped off a stack of schedules on the benches. “How's your jaw, PJ?” Jack asked.

Malecki heard the remark and smirked as he hobbled his way to the rink on his ice skates.

“It's a little tight right now, Jack,” PJ said. “That's about it.”

Later, on the ice, the players were warming up, stretching or skating around doing laps,

or doing sit-ups. Coach Thomas shouted comments to individual players while Malecki, as part of his warm up, skated into the boards as if he is checking someone. He made several 'thud' sounds and shook the glass loose to mark his territory. He banged into the glass more than once as part of his warm-up exercise. It looked comical almost.

"Holy cow!" Rogie said as he circled around PL "I'm glad he's on our side this year." He stopped in front of PJ and said, "Aren't you miffed that Malecki took your locker?"

"Don't ask stupid questions, Rogie."

While Rogie and PJ skated short bursts up and back at center ice they continued to watch Malecki who continued to pound the boards looking mean and brutish.

"I don't think I've seen him waste a smile on anyone yet," Rogie said.

"Yeah, well maybe he's not in touch with his feelings."

PJ got a full dose of the new coach's style of coaching. At first he had all the players line up: two men at a time would skate the length of the rink passing the puck back and forth. Then they did sprint up and back, from net to net, as fast as they could. In one sprint with Steve Carlson, PJ lagged behind a bit. "You're dogging it, Gallagher," Coach Thomas said. "Pick it up. Pick it up ... pick it up."

In another sprint with Malecki versus Rogie, Coach Thomas took notice of the fact that Malecki was substantially faster.

"More speed drills," Coach Thomas said as he took a position on the ice between two columns of players. His mere presents commanded their attention. "Okay gents ... or should I call you losers? You pukers have a reputation for losing the big one. That ends today. It's not going to be business as usual. Extend your stick, Carlson. Use your thighs to accelerate. Malecki, good speed. PJ, you're dogging it. You give me twenty laps after practice. Okay, now this drill is

designed to give you stamina. I'll blow the whistle and the lead man from each line will race each other. Jack will be at the other end and he will announce of the winner by raising his left or right arm. Okay, get ready."

The coach blew the whistle and the skaters raced the length of the rink. Jack raised his right arm indicating the winner of the first couple. He had them race each other for five cycles, and after the speed drills were over, the coach had them do passing drills,

"Okay men, one more speed drill with the puck and we're about done", the coach said. But before you hit the showers ... except for you Gallagher ... you gotta give me twenty laps ... I got something to say."

PJ bent over heaving breaths to the ice. Malecki came over spraying PJ with ice from the skates as he stopped. PJ responded with a harmless push.

"I saw that, Gallagher", the Coach said. "Add twenty more laps. That's forty laps you owe me." Coach Thomas skated up and down the rink like an army instructor. "There will be some changes around here," he said. "First change: Joe Malecki is your new captain."

The Carlson brothers stood together and took notice of PJ's reaction, which was non-committal at best. Actually, PJ was too tired to react. "This is the first time in five years PJ hasn't been captain," Steve said. "He's not even flinching."

"I was going to have a scrimmage today," the coach said. "But you guys are too out of shape for that. So, let's double up again. Malecki and PJ, I want you two paired from now on. Everyone else, find a partner,"

The Coach looked at Jack. "Throw the pucks out," the Coach barked. As the players formed two rows again, Jack dumped a bag of pucks on the ice. One man from each pair retrieved a puck.

“Alright. You know the drill. Pass back and forth and skate down center ice. Alternate who takes the shot and then hustle back on the perimeters. Let's go. You stop when I tell you to stop.”

One pair at a time hustled down center ice while passing the puck back and forth to his partner. When they reached the face-off circle, one player took a shot on goal and the other retrieved the puck and they both hustled back at the end of the line to do it all over again.

Thomas headed back to the bench and watched. PJ and Malecki kept up with each other and passed the puck back and forth as if they have been teammates forever. PJ exerted himself, as if he didn't want to be outdone.

“FASTER. FASTER,” was all PJ heard.

The men looked exhausted, but Thomas continued to push. “Let's move it men,” he said. “If you want to beat the Gators this year, you must be in shape. Every man on this team will be in shape, I promise you that.”

PJ and Malecki passed the puck back and forth in front of Thomas. Thomas nodded to Malecki and Malecki purposely passed the puck just out of PJ's reach. The puck slid into the boards. While PJ fetched it, Thomas yelled out, “You're dogging it Gallagher. You should've caught that. Add twenty more laps when we're done. That's sixty you owe me.”

“Why don't you round it off to an even hundred?”

“Done. A hundred it is.”

“Okay folks. That's it for today. Hit the showers. Except for Gallagher.”

The players stopped and groaned in a single voice. One by one they happily hopped past the gate enroute to the showers. As Steve passed by Coach Thomas, he slowed down and said, “You're kinda tough on PJ, Coach.”

“You don't like it, Carlson? You can join him. Give me twenty.”

Steve showed a deadpan look of surprise, then skated back on the ice and joined up with PJ and said, “This season is gonna be hell.”

In the Badger's locker room, Jeff already had showered and was putting on his street clothes. He moaned while trying to put on his pull-over sweater. He was tired, like everybody else, of course, beat from the day's workout.

“Oh, my aching body,” he said.

Steve hobbled in from the rink, sat on the bench and fell into a motionless pose.

Jeff strolled by and wanted to know how Steve was doing. He said he wasn't sure. Joking around, Steve thought he was paralyzed because he couldn't feel his legs. In fact, he thought he might be dead.”

“How's PJ? Is he still standing?”

“He's pacing himself. He'll make it.”

Back on the ice, PJ waddled from side to side grunting out a lap number as he passed by the starting point.

“Ninety-one,” he shouted to no one in particular.

The lights go out leaving PJ in the dark. The sound of steel scraping on the ice gets louder and louder as PJ approaches again. We hear a loud, “Ninety-two.”

CHAPTER FIVE

At the bar that was hosting the Badgers Beer Bash, the Badger fans crowded the counter. The Iron City House Rockers, a local band, were up on stage and playing a song in the background.

Lauren watched some fans beg the players for autographs. She noticed the hockey players were sore and worn out, hardly in any disposition to celebrate the first day of the season.

Lauren spotted Steve at the bar. She threw her hands in the air for him to come over. Steve took slow painful steps towards Lauren.

“PJ had to do extra laps, Lauren,” Steve said. “He got on the wrong side of the new coach. He’ll be here soon, but I don’t think he’s going to be in a good mood. Oh, and ... be gentle ... he’s not the captain this year.”

“What? Who did you vote in?”

“We didn’t.” Steve said. “The coach elected Malecki. The players didn’t vote this year.”

“Which player is Malecki?”

“He’s the guy at the end of the bar talking to Rogie.”

“The one who looks very grim.”

“Yeah. He doesn’t smile much. He’s the type who likes to smash people into the boards.”

Lauren spotted PJ entering the front door. “Thanks for the info, Steve,” she said before Steve left.

She waved PJ over to the booth but before he could maneuver his way over, some fans hit him for autographs. Lauren waited patiently as PJ finally had to wave a few fans off to get to her. He sat down across from her, threw his elbows on top of the bar, and rested his chin in the palms

of his hands.

“You wouldn't believe the day I had. It started with a bundle of papers I threw at the doorstep of a convenience store. The binder broke and the papers blew all over the place.”

They both feigned a smile to each other. They looked around and pretended to be interested in activity around them.

“PJ, this may not be the right time to talk about this, but ...I'm concerned about us.”

“What about us?”

“Well, when I come back from France, if we don't set a date then we'll have to go our separate ways, and wish each other God speed.”

“Wow! Sounds like you rehearsed that.”

Lauren put her fingers to PJ's lips. “I'm sorry, PJ. I want to have children, and I want to be married to someone I love before I'm 40. And I love you. So, I want us to make a commitment to each other when I come back because my ... my biological clock is ticking, as your father says.”

“OK. But before we get married I need to find out who my birth-parents are.”

PJ grabbed Lauren's hand and pulled her from the booth. As they left, the looks PJ and Malecki gave each other were not friendly. Malecki seemed to be warming up to the teammates, alcohol induced as it might be.

After they walked out of the bar, PJ took a deep breath as if he's just been released from prison and it had been years since he's seen the outside world.

“I know this is a tough time for you,” Lauren said as they walk to the car. “I know you're not captain anymore ...”

“Who told you that?”

“Steve did, and I know your family has given you a hard time about playing this season because of the concussion.”

“We don't talk about that, actually. We're a hockey family, Lauren. That's just the way it is. We talk around the problem.”

“I know being captain meant a lot to you,” Lauren said after a brief pause.

“I have only one career goal right now; to have a successful hockey season.”

“You're already a success in hockey.”

“Not until I'm a Penguin. That sounds funny, doesn't it. *Not until I'm a Penguin*. Look. I'm a penguin.”

PJ waddled, like a penguin, trying to make fun of himself. It wasn't working.

“But what if you don't get a shot with the Penguins after this season? Is it over?”

“I don't think I'm going to try anymore after this season. This is it for me.”

“Then you'll do what?”

They reached PJ's car and he banged on the hood with a voracity that scared Lauren.

“I don't know. Maybe I'll be a coach. Stop hounding me. You sound like my parents.”

They both get in the car and PJ started the engine and said nothing. He wanted to say he was sorry for the display of anger, but he just waited to get a response from Lauren. He got none. “You kind of ambushed me tonight, Lauren. Let's just call it a night and sleep on ... whatever we need to sleep on.”

“Fair enough.” And with that, PJ left the parking lot.

In the Badger's locker room the next afternoon, members of the team passed by the coach's office in route to the practice rink while Thomas sat at his desk. Malecki entered and

noticed the coach staring at his trophies that boldly stood on a shelf like a miniature skyline.

Coach Thomas picked up one of the trophies.

“Coach-of-the-Year award,” Thomas said. “I had to win three championships in a row to get this.”

“I still say we could've won without putting him down,” Malecki said.

Thomas put the trophy back. He took extra care ensuring that the trophy was in the exact position that it was before.

“You just keep the pressure on PJ. You hear?”

“Don't get me wrong, Coach. I wouldn't mind putting him out of commission for a while. I mean, he's my competition for the scoring championship. But he's a good player and he'll help us win ...”

“Let me put it another way, that you would understand. The Penguins listen to what I have to say. You and Gallagher are forwards, and when the Penguins are hit with injuries, they call me up and ask for my opinion on who's ready to come up. Catch my drift on that?”

“Say no more, Coach. Pressure's on.”

At the arena, an intra-squad scrimmage was taking place. Malecki had a red shirt on, which meant he was on defense, and PJ did not, which meant he was offense.

The action showed PJ flaunting his skating skills, escaping checks from Malecki who was trying to upstage him. The action got progressively more intense until Malecki viciously checked PJ into the boards, and the battle between them began.

Malecki was blistering fast as he skated from one end of the rink to the other, dogging PJ and flicking his stick knocking the puck out of play. Another puck was thrown in for the offense

and the action began again. This time Malecki checked PJ into the boards without incident.

“Good hustle,” the Coach said to Malecki. “Good hustle.”

PJ was flat on his back, moaning. He got up and raced towards Malecki and tripped him. The gloves came flying off. Malecki laid PJ out on the ice with an uppercut to his jaw.

A few players form a huddle over PJ. At first he appeared badly hurt. He rubbed his jaw and got up. No headache. No nausea. He was okay.

“He hits like a wuss,” PJ said in retaliation.

That night, at the dinner table in the Gallagher's dining room, William sipped on a cup of coffee. PJ was eating, and Doris sat at the table listening to PJ's diatribe about Malecki and Coach Thomas.

“And the coach just stood there, like he enjoyed that I got clocked. If I did it I would've gotten forty laps.”

PJ moved his jaw around. Testing it. “I swear,” PJ added. “I think Thomas has it in for me. I never felt this way about a coach before.”

Doris and William looked at each other as if they shared a secret. PJ noticed them staring at him.

“Okay, what is it?” PJ said, “Why are you guys looking at me that way?”

William seemed to have something to say, but was searching for the right words. He alternately looked at Doris and PJ. Doris head nodded for William to 'go ahead' and speak first.

“Okay. I think I'm partly responsible for the way Thomas is treating you.”

“Don't be silly, Dad. How could you be responsible for his behavior?”

“When I was a reporter years ago, there was this up-and-comer coach who groomed

certain players on how to be aggressive and win the game, which was a good thing, only he seemed to fall short of the betting line spread on non-competitive games.”

“You mean, he bet with or against his team he was playing?”

“I don't know if he did or not but it seemed odd to me that he would always fall short of the spread and won at the same time. He stayed under the radar that way, but according to my source, this new coach controlled two or three players. It was a great team, a team full of all-stars. He'd have them purposely foul someone. You know, a trip here, an illegal stick there. Players would be penalized, cause a power play situation, giving the advantage to the weaker team, perhaps. They would score and his team would win by only one or two goals when they should've won by five or six. The team he coached would lose the spread and he'd win a lot of money that way.”

“And this coach was Thomas?”

“Yes. I got suspicious when they crushed a team by eight goals one night and came back the next night to beat the same team by only one. A player on Thomas's team fessed up to me what the coach was doing. He did it privately and wanted anonymity because he was the one doing the Coach's dirty work. He told me when the fix was on again. The Gators were playing the last place team. It was suppose to go into overtime where they would win easily. But with two seconds left in regulation, the other team scored on a lucky deflection and he lost the game. I wrote a scathing editorial and the piece got published that night and five Gator players confessed the next day. They all got suspended. Big scandal.”

“So what happened to Thomas?”

“ Nothing. He played it smart. Thomas hid his money very well. None of the players could implicate him because he never directly told them to foul anyone. A man contacted the

players before the game to let them know when the fix was on. The players were told to follow the coach's instructions. Code talk like 'check so-and-so a little harder', or something like that, and that was their cue to smash or trip somebody. Get fouled. Playing aggressively is not a crime. You know that."

"And Thomas got away with it?"

"He did. But there was a cloud on him for a long time after I wrote the article. To this day, he blames me for any bad luck that comes his way. Today, other people have forgotten what happened, but he hasn't. You're paying for the sins of the father, I'm afraid."

"Thanks a bunch, Dad." PJ said. "It would've been nice to have known this before, so I could've been prepared."

"I could call ..."

"No. Mom, tell Dad to back off. You've done enough damage."

Doris left and went into the kitchen.

"Leave it alone, Dad. I'm not angry. I guess you did the right thing. But I'll just deal with this my own way."

Doris returned with a letter and plopped it down in front of PJ.

"On a lighter note, here's a letter from The Office of Vital Statistics."

PJ took the letter, and just stared at it.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"No," PJ said. "I'll open it tonight with Lauren."

PJ got up and as he left.

William looked at Doris and shrugged.

"Don't give me that look," Doris said. "Would it have killed you to say you were sorry

because you feel responsible. Nooo! 'You're paying for the sins of your father'. What's that?"

Doris left table leaving William to his own thoughts.

That night, at Lauren's apartment, with the TV on, they are locked in an embrace and passionately kissing. The TV sports news came on and PJ stopped kissing Lauren. His attention moved to the TV because Coach Thomas suddenly appeared on the screen with a reporter.

"Friday is opening night," the Reporter said. "How do the Badgers look, Coach?"

"The team is coming along fine. They're in real good shape," the Coach said.

"This is Malecki's first season with the team. He hasn't gained the respect of the Badger veterans, yet he's captain of the team. How do you explain that, Coach?"

"There's nothing to explain there. Next question."

"Well, Coach, PJ Gallagher was the captain for the last few years ..."

"Listen. This team has the reputation of choking when there's a big game on the line. The team needed a change to stir things up. I made that change."

"But you relegated him to second line. He's been one of the top scorers in the league since ... forever."

"When you're talking about a new season, 'forever' is a short time. Besides, we all know about his injuries. I'm going slow with him for now, that's all."

The Newscaster gave his thanks, and the scene shifted to another segment that hosted a fan. "Nothing against PJ," the fan said, "but I think Malecki and Thomas are what the Badgers need. They haven't won a title in twenty years. Those two guys made it happen in Greensburg, so ... hey, maybe this is our year."

PJ grabbed the remote, pointed it at the TV like a gun, and shut it off. Lauren sat up and

kissed PJ on the cheek. “You want to talk?” she asked.

“If you’re referring to what we just saw, no. There's nothing to talk about. I'm just not looking forward to opening night, that’s all. The guy who put me in the hospital last year is the captain of my team. He's the man of the hour. So be it.”

PJ takes the letter from Harrisburg out from his pocket.

“You had your birth certificate in your pocket all this time and you didn't tell me, you knucklehead?” She looked at the envelope. “You haven't opened it, yet.”

“I wanted to open it with you.”

She took it faster than a snapper turtle, and opened it. “Your mother's name is?” She hummed the tune to Jeopardy as she read it. “...Mary Ann Flannigan,” Lauren blurted out. “No father's name? Not available. It has your name here as Jerome Flannigan. Jerome? Really?”

She laughed, then took a hard look at PJ. “I can see you as a Jerome.”

He inspected the certificate and the letter himself, and fell silent for a few beats. “It says here my mother was nineteen when I was born.”

“We could go on the internet. If Mary Ann Flannigan is a high society type, like you think she is, then we should find something on her.”

So, they got up and went into Lauren’s bedroom to her PC. Lauren hit the return key and waited. She typed in the words Mary Ann Flannigan in quotes and a dozen messages came up from her search query on Google. She selected one and waited again. Before long, the screen filled with articles. She started to read. “Blah, blah. It says here, Mary Ann Neuberger's maiden name was Mary Ann Flannigan. Neuberger!” Lauren said. “My God, PJ. Mary Ann Neuberger! Do you know who she is? She's the heiress of Puree, if that is the same person.”

Lauren immediately typed in Mary Ann Neuberger and over two thousand URLs were

selected. She read one of the articles as PJ looked over her shoulder and read as well.

“It says here that she's fifty,” Lauren recited. “That's about how old she would be a few years ago, right?”

“About that,” PJ said. “My God! She must be rich.”

“She's a socialite. Probably very private. Protected. Look at this ...”

PL walked away and looked out the bedroom window while Lauren continued to read. After a beat, Lauren got up and walked over to him. A tear was running down his cheek.

“I don't care if she is rich,” PJ said. “I really don't. But you'd think in all these years she could've ...”

Lauren held onto him lovingly and then led him back to the computer. They sit.

“It says that she lives in Woodland Hills, California. No address.”

“Let's send a scathing E-mail to her company,” PJ said. “And maybe you'll get an email back.”

“I don't think so,” Lauren said. “Don't do anything. Just digest what you've learned. What would you say, anyway. 'Hi, you don't know me, but I'm your son who you gave up for adoption thirty something years ago'? It'll be seen by a hundred pairs of eyes before she gets it. No. You don't want to do that.”

“Just the same, I'd love to do it.”

Lauren hit a few more keys and waited. “Let's see if we can find out the phone number for the Chamber of Commerce for Woodland Hills.”

Lauren looked at the clock. “It's five PM over there. Hopefully someone will answer the phone.”

The screen threw up the telephone number and address for the Woodland Hills Chamber

of Commerce. Lauren picked up the phone, dialed and then handed the receiver to PJ.

“I don't know what to say.” PJ said. “Besides, you're better at this than I am.”

He handed the phone back just as someone answered the phone at the other end who said she was from the Woodland Hills Chamber of Commerce. Lauren commenced to ask her for information about Mary Ann Neuberger, and the lady at the Chamber of Commerce said they could not give out personal information of any about its resident but told Lauren she would forward a letter to her if Lauren wanted to mail it to the Chamber of Commerce first. Lauren thanked her for the info and hung up.

Once PJ was told what the lady at the Chamber of Commerce had said, he wanted to send Mary Anne a letter via the Chamber of Commerce right away. Lauren warned him that there was no turning back if they mailed that letter and said if Mary Anne was his mother he could be opening up a can of worms that he didn't expect. “Are you prepared for that?” Lauren asked.

“No. But let's do it anyway,” PJ said. “*How about Dear Mrs. Neuberger.* No ... that's too formal.”

“How about *Dear Mary Ann,*” Lauren suggested.

“Yes. That's good. *Dear Mary Ann. I hope you are sitting down ...*”

“No. No. How about we just say who you are and explain where you were born and when, and you believe that she is your mother because of the name on the birth certificate. Keep it simple.”

“Okay,” PJ said. “I'll ask her about my father. Ask her if she remembers his name? Did he play hockey? Where did he live?”

“Whoa,” Lauren said. “Hold on, cowboy”.

CHAPTER SIX

It was nighttime and everyone was asleep the Gallagher household including PJ who was sound asleep, dreaming.

In this dream, a woman, wearing a mink coat and expensive jewelry, watched a hockey game while sitting in the stands. She seemed interested in a specific hockey player who scored a goal and paraded around the ice.

Later, outside in the parking lot, that same hockey player came out of the arena with a few other players. A group of fans followed him and cried for his autograph. While signing one, he noticed a limousine off to the side and saw the rich woman peeking through the car window. He walked over to the car and she opened the door and pulled him in. Moans soon dominated the sound, and the limo jiggled a bit.

Nine months later, in a dingy hospital room, the rich woman was giving birth to a baby. Her feet were in stirrups while a mid-wife struggled with the delivery. The rich woman still had her mink coat on and seemed very unemotional about the experience. In fact, she was reading a newspaper while a cigarette burned in the ashtray. The soon-to-be-mother reached for the cigarette. Her diamond ring glistened as she brought the cigarette to her mouth. She puffed a mouthful of smoke, and seemed callous and detached while giving birth to a baby.

Once the mid-wife made the final cuts to the umbilical cord, the rich woman took her legs off the stirrups and got up as if nothing had happened. She reached into her pocketbook, took out some money, and tossed it on the bed.

As she left, she looked at the back of her hand as if the whole experience was like having her nails done.

An alarm woke PJ from his dream and he bolted up from bed, sweaty. He shut the alarm off. He appeared tired. The dream took a lot out of him.

PJ pulled into a convenience store lot and parked the delivery truck by the entrance. While walking around to the back of the truck, he spotted a mailbox on the side of the road. He walked over to it, and took out the letter to Mary Ann from his pocket. He thought for a beat and put the letter back into his pocket, and walked back to the truck. He pulled a newspaper bundle from the back and brought it into the store. A second later he came out of the store and got back into the truck. But the truck didn't move out of position. A few seconds later, PJ jumped out of the truck and walked over to the mailbox and stooped over it holding the letter in his hand. He opened the lid and stayed poised with the letter half in the mouth of the mailbox and half out. He hesitated for a second or two, then let go, and the letter dropped into the belly of the mailbox.

On opening day, the announcers welcomed the audience of the local TV station to the Badger Hockey Arena. The crowd buzzed with excitement.

The Gallagher family and Lauren took their seats in front of a man who held a sign that read, GO BADGERS.

At the announcer's booth, announcers Brent put the mic close to his mouth and said, "Well, the Panthers come into Youngstown Arena with a new mascot, Phil." He was referring to the clown who was frolicking on the ice and, as he passed by some Badger fans, he rubbed his eyes with his knuckles as if he was crying, mocking the fans. Inciting them.

"That's downright mean," Phil said. The Badger fans didn't like the Panther mascot very much. Several fans booed the clown.

In the locker room, the Badgers, in uniform and ready to play, scuffle their skates on the floor, pounded their thighs and, in general, showed their adrenaline rush. The coach came out of his office and said, “All right men. It's time to show the world what you're made of.”

At rink side some fans yelled as the Badgers appeared by the entrance. The organ played and the cheers built momentum.

“As is customary on opening night on home ice,” Brent announced, “each Butler Badger will be introduced.” Brent then began the introductions and the cheers morphed into a steady clap and chant.

During the introductions, the Gallagher family, along with Lauren and Uncle Felix, walked down the aisle and took their seats. Lauren sat next to Doris, who leaned into Lauren and yelled, trying to be louder than the roar of the crowd, “My son is very vulnerable right now.”

“I know,” Lauren yelled. Lauren leaned into Doris and said a little bit softer, “He is very anxious on how the fans are going to receive him tonight.”

“I know,” Doris said.

On center ice, while Malecki was introduced, the fans raised their cheers an octave. Brent stopped announcing until the fans calmed down.

PJ waited next to be introduced. Finally, announcer Brent said, “The one and only, PEEEEEE JAAAAAY GAAAALLAGERRRRRRRR!!”

The fans went into frenzy. It was obvious they still revered PJ, and judging from PJ's look, he was pleasantly surprised as he skated to center ice and acknowledged the accolades.

Malecki said to no one in particular, “Today is your day, Gallagher. Tomorrow will be mine.”

The Gallagher family seemed content with how the fans received PJ. Their faces revealed

their joy. Lauren had tears in her eyes as she gloated over how the fans received him.

Later, on the ice, the action began. Rogie passed the puck to Malecki who zigzagged down the ice. Rogie then positioned himself perfectly and waited for a pass from Malecki. But Malecki faked a pass to Rogie, which got the opposing defenseman off balance, then shot the puck himself.

“SCOOOORE,” Announcer Brent yelled into his microphone

The fans went absolutely wild. While the lights blared out the word “SCORE” on the overhead screen, and the stadium lights blinked on and off as the Badgers scored their first goal of the season. PJ looked up and patiently watched the re-play on the bench.

“Interesting beginning,” Announcer Phil said. “Malecki scores the first Badger goal of the season in the first minute of the game. And Gallagher hasn't even seen ice time yet. What do you make of that?”

“It will be more interesting to see what Thomas's strategy is with playing these two. Rumors have it Malecki and PJ are not getting along very well. Given Malecki will have more ice time, that won't bring them any closer together. That can't be good for the team.”

One of the producers frantically slices his fingers across his throat for the announcers to stop that kind of talk.

“But then again,” Announcer Phil said, “PJ's an institution here, and he'll certainly get his turn.”

“That's right, Phil.” Phil covers his microphone and leans into Brent and said, “Still, this is going to be a VERY interesting season.”

Back on the ice, PJ got his chance as the coach tapped him on the shoulder to enter the action. He skated with precision, received the puck, got checked and lost it.

The right winger for the Panther's shot the puck and the Badger goalie kept it from going in the net.

During the next play, Steve skated down the ice where he passed the puck to PJ and PJ scored.

"PJ Gallagher SCOOOORES", announcer Brent yelled.

The sentiment was clear. The scene of PJ scoring right after Malecki provoked the feeling amongst the other Badger players and the fans that everyone was in for a ride this season. PJ knew that he couldn't keep up with this escalated pace with Malecki, so he was going to have to work harder in practice and rely on the Drop Pass from other players who knew he liked those kind of passes not easily done when players are not in sync with each other. Today was different than most days, though. PJ seemed to be recharged when he scored which had, seemingly, elevated his teammates to a more frenzied level as well. It established the competitive spirit between PJ and Malecki, and the contest between them had accelerated. The expressions on William and Father Felix's faces told all. This was going to be an exciting season.

PJ appeared to be exhausted after the first game, yet he played with great intensity, as he didn't want to be out played by Malecki. Still, PJ bent over with exhaustion while Malecki looked more assured of himself and carried himself with a higher energy level than PJ.

On another day: PJ made a mistake, and many fans booed him, which they would not have done in previous years. PJ smacked the glass in frustration.

In another game Malecki scored effortlessly while PJ just watched while sitting on the bench.

In another game, PJ lost the puck to the opposing team. He was losing momentum with

the new captain as Malecki scored again.

PJ drove the newspaper distribution truck, and almost fell asleep and got into an accident. After work he went and saw Father Felix and told him about the near accident he had.

“I don’t know if you ever took the Myers-Briggs test, but you obviously are an ENFP,” Father Felix said. “That means you’re an Extraverted, Intuitive, Feeling kind of person. I forget what the ‘p’ stands for, Anyway, these people tend to get into car accidents more the other’s. Sooner or later you’re going to daydream yourself into an accident, either with the truck or with your car. Why don’t you exercise more. Better yet, why don't you try writing your story. Getting your conflicts written down on paper and applying them to a fictitious character can be very therapeutic.”

PJ was not convince and just shrugged his shoulders.

“Let's pray on it then,” Father Felix said. And they held hands and prayed.

In the Gallagher’s kitchen, Doris loaded the dishwasher while listening to the rest of the Gallagher family who were in the living room watching TV. After a few seconds PJ entered the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a soda.

“How's the search for your birth-parents coming along, PJ? It's been a while since you mailed the letter to what's her name?”

“Mary Ann Neuberger. I sent the letter to the Chamber Of Commerce in a town where she supposedly lived. Have you received anything?”

“Absolutely not,” Doris said. “I'm just wondering if you have the right person,”

“Yeah, well, she's either not my birth mother, or she doesn't care. It’s one or the other,

because she hasn't responded."

"I hate to be the one to tell you, 'I told you so', but I did. You can still go the Catholic Charities. If you're lucky, they'll let you see the records. It's right outside of Greensburg."

"I know, Mom. I'll take a trip to the office and check it out when we play Greensburg."

"Under the circumstances, I don't think you should tell your father. He's being funny about all this."

"Tell me about it. Why is he being that way? I'm not doing this because he, or you, have failed in any way. I'm doing this because ..."

Just then, William walked in. "You're doing what?" he asked.

"What?"

"You said 'I'm doing this because... and you didn't finish the sentence. What is it you're doing?'"

"I don't understand," PJ said.

William looked to Doris to seek her help.

"What?" Doris asked

"What?" PJ said

"Okay," William said. "I get the picture." William took out a beer from the refrigerator and shot a look at PJ as he headed back into the living room,

"What?" PJ asked again.

"Nothing," William replied. "I'm watching football. Cleveland is losing. Life is great."

Doris looked PJ square in the eye and said, "Go to the Catholic Charities. You'll get some answers there."

"Mom! Enough. I said I would. Has anyone told you lately that you are very controlling?"

And Lauren is getting as bad as you are. Women? Can't live with 'em and ... whatever comes next."

Tom entered the kitchen. "And you can't live without them."

Tom headed for the refrigerator and took out a beer, just as Phil walked in and looked in the refrigerator. "Any soda left?"

"Gotta look," PJ said.

"By the way, good game yesterday," Phil said to PJ.

"Thanks. Did you hear an abnormal amount of boos?"

"I did," Phil said. "And they were mostly from the women."

"The men think you're hot stuff," Tom added.

Doris threw her hands in the air in a dramatic display of exasperation as her sons retreated into the living room.

In PJ's parent's bedroom, Doris was sound asleep. William tossed and turned, appearing to be having a hard time sleeping. All of a sudden, there was a tapping noise. It stopped. There it was again. Tap. Tap. Tap. William got up, put on his robe, and took out the gun he had in the night table.

In the hallway, William saw that the door to PJ's bedroom was slightly ajar. William hid the gun in his robe pocket and investigated. Much to his surprise he saw PJ typing away on his computer, so he returned to bedroom.

The Badger team was on the bus with Thomas and Jack in the front seat. Thomas stood up and faced the players. "Okay, listen up," he said. "This game has some importance since I

think it'll be another Greensburg and Badger championship series this year.”

“Yeah, and with a different outcome this time,” Rogie yelled out.

A few of the players yelled out their comments on how the results were going to be different, but Thomas put an immediate stop to any ad-lib comments by saying that Greensburg’s strength was in their depth. “But we have a stronger asset,” Thomas said. “Anyone know what that is?” Thomas asked. But no one answered. PJ just stared out the window while Thomas talked.

“Speed,” Thomas said. “We're faster. But I don't want you to show all your speed today. Vindication will be yours, but not tonight. If tonight were the seventh game of the championship series, then I would say go all out, by all means. But it’s not. It’s getting to know you time.”

PJ snapped his head forward as if Thomas might be giving a 'special' message to one or two of the players.

“I want a controlled game, today. I want you to win, of course, but do it by controlling the puck. Dazzle them with your passing. Let them get tired by chasing the puck, not you. We'll show 'em our speed when it counts. All in due time, men. Today, we control the puck. Next time we'll do both.”

As the Badger players filed out of the bus one-by-one at the Greensburg hockey stadium, Thomas said, “Don't wander too far. Be back here in three hours.”

“I'm going to the locker room to sack out. I'm tired,” Rogie said to the coach.

“I don't want to hear that you're tired before the game. Give me your all during the game and then say you're tired.”

PJ hailed a taxi.

“If you’re going downtown,” Steve said, “we can share a taxi.”

“No. I’m ... seeing a friend,” PJ said as he hopped into a taxi and slammed the door in a hurry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The taxi pulled up to the Catholic Charities and PJ got out of the cab. He glanced around a beat then walked in the building looking confident as he looked around for some help. He found that help in the form of an old woman walking down the hall.

“Can I help you?” the old woman asked.

“I’m looking for Christine Carroll,” PJ said.

The old woman pointed to MS. Carroll’s office marked ‘Administration Office’ and PJ followed her direction.

Once inside he saw that there was no receptionist so he sat in the waiting room. He saw the main office door was open and as he was about to go in, a woman’s voice yelled out “I’ll be with you in a minute,” so PJ sat and waited. After a second or two the woman’s voice invited PJ in.

Once inside, PJ asked for Christine Carroll thinking the woman was a receptionist since she was typing on a computer and the walls were obscured with filing cabinets.

“I’m her,” she said, “How can I help you?”

At the Greensburg Hockey Arena, the camera operators were setting up in the press box, testing their equipment. The stands were pretty much empty, although the arena was beginning to fill up. Among those who arrived early was Father Felix.

Meanwhile, back at the Catholic Charities Administration Office, Christine Carroll advised PJ that the company policy prohibited her from sharing the birth records with the adopted parents. “Our reputation hinges on our ability to keep our clients anonymous,” she said.

“But I already know my mother’s name is Mary Ann Flannigan,” PJ said. “Excuse me, her new name is Neuberger ...”

Carroll stood and held out her hand. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But like you said, don’t you have a game to go to.”

PJ left dejected and sulked the entire trip back to the arena, which actually took much longer than he thought. Sitting in the back seat of the taxi, he noticed red brake lights ahead of them. The taxi driver surmised it was a car accident, but there was nothing he could do except stop and wait.

All the Badger players were in their game uniforms in the visitors’ locker room at the Greensburg Hockey Arena. In the locker room, Coach Thomas was in the middle of a pep talk when PJ stormed in.

“Well, it’s nice that could join us, Gallagher. You’ve just been relegated to third linesmen for today’s game. Jeff, you move up to second squad.”

PJ kicks the bench into the lockers and everyone’s attention was focused on PJ. He fiddled with the Tau Cross that hung over his shirt.

“You’re a piece of work, Thomas,” PJ said. “Why don’t you tell everyone why you don’t want them to use their speed tonight. How many goals do you want to shave today? Hmm? Two? Maybe three?”

Players look to each other. They couldn’t believe what they just heard.

Malecki just smiled.

PJ gripped the cross tightly.

“That’ll cost you, Gallagher. Don’t bother dressing. You’re scratched for today’s game.”

PJ ripped the cross from his neck and tossed it across the room. It landed in front of Malecki who just stared at it while PJ stormed out of the room.

At the Greensburg hockey grandstand area, PJ sat in the stands while the first period ended with Greensburg ahead one to nothing.

“Is this seat taken?” Father Felix said.

“Uncle Felix,” PJ said, “What are you doing here?”

“I should be asking you that same question. I'm here to see my nephew score a hat trick. I guess I'm not going to see that today. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“My anger got the best of me, I guess. Coach told us to be low key today, and I accused him of shaving goals and the next thing I know, I'm sitting here ... alone.”

“Hmm. A little impetuous are we?”

On the ice, Malecki takes a shot on goal and he misses.

“Well, since you're here,” Father Felix said. “Let me ask you, how's that writing coming along?”

“Slow.”

“Slow as in, ‘I'm not doing it’, or slow as in ‘I'm writing, but it's slow moving.’”

“Uncle Felix,” PJ stammered, “I understand what you're trying to say, okay.”

“What is it that I'm trying to say?”

“That writing is good therapy, or some such happy ...”

Just then, the action of the ice interrupted their conversation. Malecki checked a Greensburg's player against the boards.

“Okay,” Father Felix said, a little frustrated himself. “So, what else is new?”

“Aside from screwing up my hockey career, I’m just trying to find out the meaning of life. That’s all.”

“Oh, that’s all. Let me know if you make any headway on that, will ya?”

“I have already. Life sucks no matter how you sugar coat it,” PJ said before falling into a moment of silence. They sat for a few seconds and watched the action on the ice. Finally, Father Felix spoke up. “Do you know how women look when they want sex?”

PJ sighed, then shook his head. He knew when Father Felix got this way, he was not to be denied. “No,” he simply said waiting for the punch line.

“Me neither,” Father Felix said as he slapped his knee as if he told the funniest joke in the world. PJ gave in a little, smiled and said, “Don’t give up your day job, Father.”

“Let me tell you a story,” Father Felix said. “One evening an old Cherokee Indian told his son about a battle that was going on inside himself. He said, “My son, it is between two wolves. One is evil: anger, greed, arrogance, self-pity, inferiority. The other is good: joy, peace, love, serenity.” The son thought about it for a minute and then asked, “Which wolf won?”

Greensburg scored and the roar of the crowd interrupted Father Felix’s story.

“Two nothing in the first period! They miss you out there, PJ.”

PJ waited for a beat or two, then asked Father Felix what the Indian father said.

“The son asked, ‘which wolf won?’” PJ said. “So, how did the father respond.”

“Oh, yeah,” Father Felix said, looking confused as if the confusion was all part of the story. “So the son asks ‘which wolf won’. And the father says, ‘the one I feed’.”

PJ ingested the message for a moment then leaned forward on the rail and looked out onto the ice. He turned to Father Felix and just smiled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

William sat at the kitchen table and started to read the newspaper beginning with the sport section. The headline in the front page read, “GALLAGHER BENCHED AS BADGERS LOSE TO GREENSBURG 4 TO 3.

His suspension over, PJ sat on the ice bench and was the next player to enter. Coach Thomas tapped him on the shoulder. In the stands, while William watched his son fly off the bench to join the action, he also sat patiently as the Badgers won their fifth game in a row. The Badgers were on their way to a winning season. In most of those games Malecki was the star although PJ quietly kept pace with him in the scoring column. Malecki got more playing time, but by Christmas time, even though Malecki was the scoring leader, PJ was third, just four points behind. If they ended the post season in a tie, PJ would win because he scored the points in less games.

The league tied to follow the same schedule as the professional hockey league, which was October through early April. The Badgers played the same amount of games, which were around 82. And the playoffs mirrored the pro’s Stanley Cup playoffs,

During most of this time, PJ kept vigilant over his writing, but didn’t tell his parents what he was doing. For example, when he couldn’t sleep, he’d get up and work on his memoir, as was the case this one night. He couldn’t sleep and, as usual, he started working on the manuscript. In William's bedroom, PJ’s dad opened his eyes to the tapping sounds of a computer's keyboard. He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but couldn’t. He got up and followed the tapping sounds

that were keeping him up. It was coming from PJ's bedroom. Since the door was open, he peeked in and saw PJ typing at his computer. He didn't want to disturb him so he went back to his bedroom.

William, Doris, and PJ were taking down the decorations from the Christmas tree in the living room.

"Greensburg has a lot of depth in their lineup," PJ said. "They're a good team."

"So are the Badgers," William said.

"I got a great idea," Doris said. "Let's not talk hockey tonight. Let's talk about something else."

Just as she said this, the phone rang and she answered it. After she asked who it was, she extended the receiver to PJ and said, "It's Mary Ann Neuberger."

He took the phone from his mother as if it were radioactive. With trepidation he offered a soft "Hello".

"Hello. I'm Mary Ann Neuberger," the woman on the other end said.

"Hi." PJ said not knowing what else to say.

Mary Ann told PJ what she got his letter and wished him a Merry Christmas.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," PJ said.

There was silence then Mary Ann told PJ that she didn't know what to say.

"Neither do I," PJ said.

"What's your name. I want to hear it from your lips."

"Patrick Jerome Gallagher. People call me PJ."

"I looked you up on the internet. So, you're a hockey player, huh?"

“Yeah. That’s what some people say.”

“Well, PJ, why are you looking for me after all these years?”

“I don't know. Mid-life crisis, I guess?” He then asked asked her for her telephone number.

“Listen, PJ,” Mary Ann said, “I don't want to sound callous but ... I'm an old lady now, and much too old to start a mother-son relationship. I'm way beyond mid-life. You can understand that, can't you?”

In the kitchen, William took a seat at the table. “I don't want her in our lives,” he said to Doris.

“Leave it be, William. Everything will be fine if you keep your nose out of it.”

PJ whispered into the phone so he couldn't be heard by his adopted parents, “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes,” Mary Ann said.

“Who's my father?”

There was a very long pause before Mary Ann admitted she didn't know.

“You don't know?” PJ said, “Or you forgot his name? Or you won't tell me?”

“Listen,” Mary Ann said. “I had a one night fling and I can't remember his name.”

“Does he know about me?”

“It was just a one night stand,” Mary Ann said. “I didn't see the need to tell him, so ... no, he doesn't know.”

PJ opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“Listen,” Mary Ann said. “I'm calling to ask you not to seek a permanent relationship with me. I know that sounds cruel, but I'm also asking you to please understand. I wish you well,

but I'm not in the best of straights right now. Emotionally speaking. I just came off a bout with AFib and ... I can't do this. Too much pressure."

In the kitchen, even though William was reading the newspaper, he cared more about was being talked about on the phone. And although Doris seemed at peace reading a magazine, she was churning inside, quickly turning the pages, and not reading at all.

Having finished the phone call, PJ walked in and plopped himself down in a chair.

He was the first one to speak. "She said I am the result of a one night fling with a guy she doesn't even remember. And she doesn't want me calling her again. I don't believe it. This is a dream."

"You mean, she didn't tell you who your birth-father was?" William asked.

"She says she doesn't know his name."

"Hmm. I'll believe that when the moon rolls over. I think she's putting you on, PJ."

Doris throws a 'don't be stupid' look at William. PJ got up, still in a daze, and as he left he said, "I'm going over to Lauren's. She's got last minute shopping to do for France."

"That's right; she'll be going in two weeks."

PJ exited the kitchen and the sound of the front door slamming shouted a signal that PJ had left the building.

"I was talking to Mr. Slater, the sports editor over at the Gazette," William said to Doris. "He said that the Penguins told Badgers management to cut PJ at the end of the season because he's a medical risk."

"Good, God!" Doris said. "When it rains, it pours." She waited a few seconds and then added, "If the information is reliable, William, you have to tell PJ."

"Oh, it's reliable. But I can't ..."

“You have to, William. The sooner he plans for a new life the better.”

Later that night at the Mall, while PJ and Lauren window shopped, Lauren said, “So, she doesn't want you calling her. She's probably a real eccentric, like Howard Hughes. He was like that, you know? Rich people are like that in general. They want to be left alone. They miss the anonymity.”

“She said that my birth father never knew I existed. I hope that's true. I don't feel so bad now. I mean, that explains why he never tried to contact me, right?”

“True. It also explains why he didn't claim you were his son and take you from Catholic Charities who, by the way, probably has his name in their records somewhere. You should go back there. Try again.”

“What good is that going to do?”

“They might let you see the records now, especially if you tell them your birth-mother has given you permission. I know she hasn't though. Nevertheless, bluff them. Give them her phone number. If you don't have it, then make one up, and tell them to verify with her. They won't call it, and if they do, well ... at least you tried.”

“I don't know, Lauren. That Christine Carroll was very adamant about the rules. Besides, Mary Ann probably didn't give a name for the father.”

Lauren stopped in front of a lingerie window. While she looked, she said, “She was nineteen at the time. Maybe she just forgot it. Five decades has probably dulled her brain.” She pointed to the window and asked, “Would I look good in that?”

PJ half-heartedly looked. Then he looked at her up and down.

“You'd look good in a potato sack.”

“Agh, aren’t you sweet,” she said as they continued walking and looking in the windows. “So, when am I going to read this story of yours,” she said. “You better have a love interest who is a very positive influence in your life.”

“I should have it done tomorrow. You can proof it for me.”

PJ found himself in the early morning putting the finishing touches to his story on the computer. He finally finished and printed out a copy. He took the first page from the printer and started scribbling on it, making corrections. He lifted his pencil from the paper and whispered to himself, “I’m just like my father. I can’t stop making corrections. I’m doomed!”

That night, at Lauren’s apartment, Lauren read PJ’s manuscript while PJ watched TV. PJ alternately looked at her and the TV. He was trying to determine if she had any emotion while reading.

Lauren caught him looking at her and told him she couldn’t read this manuscript while PJ was watching, so she got up and went into the bedroom where she would have a little privacy. “You watch TV,” she said, “And don’t bug me until I’m finished.”

PJ fell asleep on the couch with the TV on. Lauren came in the living room and gave him a little nudge. PJ bolted up and his first reaction was he wanted to know what she thought. She thought it was terrific.

“Really? You not just saying that, are you?”

“No. This is not just a hockey story. It’s about a hockey player who is trying to come to grips with being adopted. It’s really good, PJ. You should show it to your dad.”

“No way. He’ll just mark it up until I won’t recognize it anymore.”

“Maybe he’ll make it better, although I can’t see how.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you? You really think it's good?”

“Don’t get insecure on me when I tell you I like it. But don’t get me wrong, either.

There’s a few places where I put my two-cents in but, largely, it’s really a good story. I mean, I cried when the main character talked to his birth-mother for the first time.” Lauren went to say something, but took a deep breath instead.

“What!” PJ demanded. “What!”

“It doesn’t seemed to be finished. There’s no closure on the birth-father. Who he is, I mean.”

“Maybe the hero finds the birth-father,” PJ said, “and they have an argument and the hero sues the father and takes him to court, and ...”

“How about the hero finds the birth-father,” Lauren suggested, “whom he welcomes with open arms, and the father welcomes his birth son with open arms. Everyone is happy. The adopted parents don't get slighted. Etcetera, etcetera.”

“Now, how realistic is that?”

“Very.”

“Boring.”

“Says who.”

“Me.”

“You’re just the writer. You don’t count.”

PJ quietly entered the Gallagher house that night with the manuscript in a shirt box, which was firmly tucked under his arm. He tiptoed to the stairs, but heard the TV in the living room. He peeked in and saw William was asleep. PJ went in to shut the TV off and William

perked up and rubbed his eyes,

“It's late for you, Dad, isn't it?”

“A little. Come in. Sit.”

PJ placed the box on the coffee table and sat.

“It's late for you too.” William turned off the TV.

William wanted to know when the Badgers were playing Greensburg again.

“Day after tomorrow,” PJ said. “It's our last game with them in regulation season.” He waited for William to say something else, but his dad remained silent. “Dad,” PJ added, “do you want to small talk, or do you have something important to say? I'm a little tired.”

“This is hard for me, son. Please. Be patient. I'm thinking on how to say this.”

“Just say it.”

“I talked to Mr. Slater the other day.”

“The sports editor of the Gazette?”

“Yes. Well, he told me that the Badgers intend on cutting you at the end of the season. You're supposedly a medical risk. You know, with the concussions and all.”

PJ sat back taking the statement as if he just got punched in the stomach. “Would they do that, Dad? Even if I won the scoring championship?”

“I don't know, son. I'm just telling you what Slater told me. Are you okay?”

“I'm ah ... Am I okay? Hmm. Well ... I guess I feel a little numb.”

“That's understandable.”

“I'm going to bed now.” PJ got up and started to walk away. He came back, picked up the shirt box from the coffee table, nodded to William and went to his bedroom upstairs.

CHAPTER NINE

As PJ and Lauren strolled down a walkway to a terminal in the airport, they met up with Lauren's students.

“Patricia and Danielle,” Lauren said, “This is Patrick Gallagher. PJ these are my students, Patricia and Danielle.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said thinking the opposite. He didn’t want to meet anyone at the moment. He didn’t tell Lauren what Slater told his father, but Lauren suspected something was wrong. She excused herself from her students and pulled PJ to the side.

“Okay, mister,” Lauren said. “You’ve been brooding ever since you first picked me up this morning. Tell me what's the matter.”

“Nothing.”

“On the ride up here you hardly spoke a word. Something's wrong.”

“This is your day. I don't want to make it my day. I'm going to miss you, that's all.”

“Okay. Have it your way.” She didn’t know what else to say, especially considering Patricia and Danielle were huddled together 20 feet away looking afraid and lonely. Lauren looked at them with solace in her heart, and held up one finger. “I’ll just be one minute,” she yelled out to them. Then she turned to PJ. “Go to Catholic Charities,” she said, “and tell them that if they don't let you see the records that they'll have to deal with me. You beat Malecki’s ass in the scoring race while I’m gone. Beat Greensburg and bring home that championship cup. And when I come home I want to be able to introduce you as my fiancée, Capisce.”

“That's Italian.”

“Pardonnez moi.” She looked at her students and yelled, “How do you say ‘Do you understand’ in French?”

Danielle yelled back, "Comprenez-vous?"

"There you go. I don't teach French. I teach social studies."

"I wish I had a teacher like you while growing up," PJ said. "I love you very much, and let me know how to reach you as soon as you get settled."

They hug.

"Take care of business. Au revoir." Lauren said.

"Bon voyage."

The Badger bus pulled up next to a sign that said 'Welcome to Greensburg Stadium'. Coach Thomas was the first to get off the bus. He looked at his watch and said, "I want everyone suited up in three hours. So, don't wander too far."

Steve walked over to PJ and asked if PJ wanted to go into town and catch a movie and relax a bit. PJ told him that he had an errand to do and couldn't.

"Okay. Mum's the word. Catch you later," Steve said, just as PJ got into a taxi.

An hour later, the taxi pulled up to the Catholic Charities Administration Office Building, and PJ asked the taxi driver to please wait because he wouldn't be that long and he needed to get back to the stadium within the hour.

A young woman greeted PJ at the admin office. She locked her desk and flung her purse over her shoulder and was ready to leave when PJ walked in.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"I'd like to see Christine Carroll."

"I don't have anyone in my appointment book for this time ..."

Before the young lady had a chance to say anything else, PJ headed right into Christine's

office, and the young lady followed him in.

“It’s okay,” Christine Carroll said to the young woman, and then focused her attention on PJ. “Mr. Gallagher, isn’t it?”

PJ nodded. They shook hands and PJ sat as if he was invited to stay.

“Something tells me that I know why you’re here. Again.”

“I have a different pitch this time.”

“But I’m afraid I still have the same answer, regardless.”

“Please, hear me out, Ms. Carroll.” He took a deep breath, and then said, “I was going to tell you my birth-mother gave me permission to look at the records. But she did not. Mrs. Neuberger, Mary Ann Flannigan in your records, doesn’t want me to pursue her. So I won’t. But she said nothing about trying to find out the name of my birth father.”

Christine starts to object, but PJ won’t let her talk.

“Ms. Carroll, all during my childhood I was afraid someone would come up to me and confront me with lurid details of my birth-parents. Maybe they were drug addicts, or something worse. Maybe they were Bonnie and Clyde type characters. What did I know? I shied away from ever wanting to know anything about them because of that. And I’ve had this vague sense of rejection all along. As much as I’ve tried to shake it, I couldn’t. I can’t. Now, I’m led to believe that my birth-father never knew that I was born. He didn’t reject me. He never had the opportunity. I don’t know who he is, but in the bottom of my heart I believe he has the right to know. My birth-mother forgot his name. Okay, I’ll believe her. But I think his name is in that folder, somewhere. And I think it’s about time he knows.”

Christine stared at him, thoughtfully. She walked over to one of the cabinets, pulled out a file, and walked back and laid it on her desk.

“I did some checking after your last visit, Mr. Gallagher, and I feel... Well, there's no need to tell you how I feel, outside the fact I root for the Gators, not the Badgers.” Christine’s chuckle turned into a sigh. “Contrary to what you might think, my sense of righteousness is not rooted in established processes. But, be that as it may, processes make us successful but they don't cover all situations.”

“Hmmm. I have to go to the lady’s room. I usually take about five minutes.”

She left and PJ stared at the file on the desk. After a beat he opened it and began reading. He flipped one page after another until he stopped at one report and read it. The words, ‘FRED HARRINGTON’ appeared in red ink on the side of page one and the word ‘FATHER’ underneath it.

PJ quickly wrote the name on a piece of paper and left the office.

PJ stormed outside and got into the waiting taxi.

“Home, James,” PJ said in a contrived voice.

A little later, the Badgers drifted out of the visitor’s ramp and onto the ice. PJ was the last to appear. “Well, this is the last inter-division meeting between Greensburg and the Badgers,” Brent said in the announcer's booth. “The Badgers are 0-and-two and need a win tonight for a psychological lift in case they meet again in the championship series.”

“I don’t think there’s any doubt that the finals should be between these two teams,” Phil said. “But don't forget Brent, Gallagher was serving a suspension in one of those games. Most people think the Badgers are a better team with PJ in the lineup.”

The face-off started the game. Brutal checks, and fast skating dominated the game.

Greensburg scored three times, then Malecki scored, then PJ scored. PJ passed to Steve

who scored to tie up the score up and sent the game into overtime. With time running out, Malecki and PJ made a rare appearance on the ice together. Announcers were cheering just like the fans were. It was hard to tell who was enjoying the excitement more, the fans or the Announcers.

With the seconds running down, PJ skated free and had a clear shot. Instead of passing to PJ, Malecki shot and missed. The game ended in a tie.

“What a shame,” Announcer Brent said.

“Gallagher was open and was denied the hat trick,” Announcer Phil added. “Gallagher gained a point in the scoring category. Only three points separates Malecki and Gallagher now.

PJ typed on the computer in his bedroom at a fast pace while looking at a paper marked in red. He clicked on a search engine at the computer and typed ‘Fred Harrington’ in the search box. An article appeared about Fred being a hockey legend in Canada.

He ran downstairs at Doris’ beckoning and sat at the kitchen table, where he joined Doris and William for dinner. He began eating like there was no tomorrow and was finished well ahead of both of them without a word being spoken by any of them.

“Finished,” PJ said and then got up. “Thanks for dinner, Mom,” he added. “I have to get back upstairs.”

PJ vanished while his parents continued eating.

“He's obsessing, isn't he?” William said.

“There's anger in your voice,” Doris said.

“It’s not anger. It's ...” William seemed stumped as to what to say. He relaxed and finally said, “It’s Fred Harrington! I knew I recognized that name. I did some checking myself. He's a

hockey legend in Canada. He was a minor leaguer in Toronto. One of the best minor league players of all time, for crying out loud.”

“Will you stop. You think you lost your son, the way you're talking.”

In PJ's bedroom, he was furiously typing, as if he had an inspiration. On the monitor his thoughts appear: *'I approached my father not knowing whether he would accept me, the son who was born years ago to a woman whose name and face were lost due to the passage time.'*

In the living room, in response to the phone ringing, PJ appeared at the top of the stairs quickly. He listened as Doris casually answered the phone. She waved PJ off. It was not Lauren. Another call came into the Gallagher household.

“Excuse me, Bertha, I got another call.” She hit a key on the phone. “Oh, hello, Lauren,” Doris finally said. Doris barely said ‘goodbye’ to Bertha, her neighbor, before PJ bolted back to the stairwell and skipped quickly down the stairs. Doris handed the phone to PJ and sauntered back to the kitchen.

Once PJ and Lauren dispensed with the ‘how are you’ amenities, PJ told Lauren that he finally knew who his father was “He's a hockey player,” he said, “and a damn good one, it appears.”

PJ told Lauren that he couldn't believe he was so close living right outside of Toronto. He was a seven hour trip by car away. Six if he hurried. He told her that he was not waiting for the playoffs to be over. Since the season was almost over he figured it would be another five weeks before he could take the trip. “We have a two-day break after tomorrow's game,” he said, “so I'm going up to Toronto day after tomorrow to confront him ... to tell him he has a son and see what he says.”

In the Badgers' locker room that next day, the Badgers entered one by one with their uniform and skates on. Most of them were pretty much exhausted having just finished a game. Rogie slapped PJ on the back and told him he played a nice game.

Off to the side, Steve and Jeff were removing their shirts when Steve said, "How many is PJ behind now?"

"With this hat trick, I think he's behind by two."

PJ came over by his locker, and Steve and Jeff congratulated PJ for a fine game.

PJ pulled into a dimly lit newspaper parking lot. He exited the truck and jumped into his car. Having finished his Sunday run at work, he drove to Toronto. Like he predicted, it took him four-and-a-half hours to get to the border and another hour to Toronto.

The sun shown far in the east when PJ drove past a sign that said 'Toronto – 5 miles'. He pulled over into a parking lot of a small diner. He let the air out of his lungs in a long, measured blast. If nothing else, he needed a cup of coffee to keep him awake.

PJ entered the diner and sat at the counter. A waitress came over.

"And what will you have, cowboy?" she said.

"A coffee and well done French fries, but before you go I want to ask you a question."

"Let's have it," the waitress said.

"Did you ever hear of Fred Harrington?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course. He's a celebrity around these parts. He comes in here often."

"Good. I want to get his autograph," PJ said.

"You and half the country," she said and waited for him to respond. When he didn't she

just added, “Well, he's approachable. Shouldn't have a problem getting it.”

PJ ate his fries quickly, gulped half his coffee, and left.

PJ drove into a middle class neighborhood and alternately looked at the houses and a piece of paper. He finally reached his destination, parked on the side of the road, got out of his vehicle and walked up to the stoop of an average-looking house. He made the motion to knock on the door, but he couldn't do it. So he left, jumped back into his car and just sat there for a half hour. Just as he found the courage to try again, Fred Harrington came out of the house, walked down the porch and strolled down the street.

PJ followed on foot, and as he watched his birth-father from a distance, he noticed that the townspeople greeted Fred with great respect and admiration. A boy asked him for his autograph, and Fred stopped to give it, gladly.

PJ walked towards Fred, but stopped and told himself not to be afraid. From a distance he saw Fred had another autograph out, then continued on his journey. PJ followed him and almost had to jog to keep up. PJ got closer and closer, and just as he was at arm's length, Fred made a sharp left and headed down a side street.

PJ stopped, still letting fear take over most of his composure. Too much to conquer, he felt, so he turned and headed back to his car.

CHAPTER TEN

PJ entered the Gallagher house and quietly headed upstairs to his bedroom. He plopped himself in his bed, and fell asleep right away.

That morning he got up, made a cup of coffee in the kitchen, and headed right for his computer in his room and began typing. He spent the whole day writing and didn't stop until early evening. He looked at his watch and couldn't believe where the time had gone.

The phone rang and PJ bolted from his chair. He ran full speed from from his room, down the stairs and to the phone before Doris had a chance to get out of the kitchen chair. It was Lauren, of course, and PJ asked her how her day went before he told her the events of the previous day.

"I ... I just couldn't do it," he said. "I saw him, but I couldn't confront him. He's so respected. People love him up there. He's a god. I didn't ... I felt that ... I couldn't. What if he ..." PJ couldn't finish the sentence.

"...rejected you," Lauren finished for him.

"Yeah. I mean, he's in the Hockey Hall Of Fame, for crying out loud."

"So, you approach him and tell him that you play hockey too, that's all. He's just another human being like the rest of us."

"And then what? Tell him, 'By the way, I'm your son?' There's too many kooks in this world. He wouldn't believe me."

As PJ continued talking, William was sitting in the recliner and could hear every word. He stared ahead with a newspaper on his lap and listened to every word PJ was saying.

Fans were filling the stands of Badger Stadium as the pre-game hype prevailed - organ playing, fans howling, etc.

In the Announcer's Booth, Brent switched the microphone to talk. "Well folks," he said, "this is the Badgers' last game of the season against the Cumberland Cougars. This game doesn't hold much importance since the Badgers won their division by fifteen points, but the scoring championship is still in question."

"That's right, Brent," Phil said. "We still have the scoring championship contention going on. Malecki has sixty points and PJ is only one behind. The top two in the division standings.

"And they're tied in the goal category," Kent said. "Malecki and Gallagher lead the league with thirty-five goals each."

"That's right, Kent. And for those viewers who don't know how the individual goal trophy is determined, if it is a tie, the player who has scored the goals in the least amount of games wins the goal trophy."

"Which means, Phil, if the game ends with PJ and Malecki tied in the goal category, then PJ will win the trophy because he missed four games and Malecki only missed one."

"This is going to be an exciting match. I'm looking forward to it."

In the Gallagher's living room Doris glanced at the TV while she pretended to be engrossed in knitting. William was totally glued to the TV. The Cougars had the puck but Steve stole it. The Badgers crossed the offensive blue line. Steve passed to PJ, but Malecki skated in front of PJ, intercepted the pass that was intended for PJ, shot, and scored just before the game-ending buzzer. The reactions of Father Felix and PJ at the arena, and William and Doris at home were the same. William threw his paper against the wall

PJ was writing in his bedroom when the phone rang. He bolted from his chair as Doris answered the phone. PJ raced down the stairs, fell and lay motionless at the bottom steps not far from Doris. He moaned while testing his neck and shoulders.

“Hi, Lauren. He's right here. Come home as soon as you can. He can't seem to walk without you around.”

Doris stretched the phone to PJ who took the call lying down. They said their hellos while Doris went back into the kitchen where William was sitting reading a magazine and drinking coffee.

“I wish they would get married already,” Doris said.

William, reading a joke for the magazine, asked, “How do you get a sweet little eighty-year-old lady to say the ‘F’ word.” He waited a second or two then said, “Get another sweet little eighty-year-old lady to yell, ‘BINGO’.”

As Announcer Brent explained that this was the first game of the playoff series, patrons filled the hockey arena quicker than usual. As more people arrived and took their seats, a heavy buzz in the air created a lot of anticipation. This night, however, there were more fans who had their bodies and faces painted than usual.

As the face-off in the first period started the game, the TV cameras were on the prowl to observe the action. Some of the newspaper reporters were in the press-box, but others were sitting in their choice seats quietly observing the game.

That next morning, PJ threw a paper bundle at a convenience store. The lead story of the

top paper in the bundle read: BADGERS WIN FIRST ROUND PLAYOFF. SWEEP SERIES.

The second series for the Badgers had Malecki and PJ skating with passion. No fan would be hard pressed knowing both these men had great passion for the game. They skated briskly. They passed brilliantly. PJ especially. And they scored frequently.

At work the next day, PJ dropped off another bundle of papers at a convenience store. The lead story of the top paper in the bundle read: BADGERS WIN SECOND ROUND.

After William finished brushing his teeth the next morning in the upstairs' bathroom, he walked out of the bathroom and saw PJ's bedroom door opened. He went over to close it but noticed a folder stuffed under a magazine at PJ's desk. His curiosity got the better of him, so he went inside and looked in the folder. It was PJ's manuscript, so William began reading it.

At the Badger Hockey Arena, excited fans pack into the arena. The Gallagher family took their seats just as the Badgers skated onto the ice to the howling frenzy of the fans. The Gators took the ice to the scoffing boos of the fans.

As the national anthem played, the crowd, the players and announcers gave reverence to the flag. When the anthem ended, and after the referee blew the whistle, the players scurried to the bench while the first lines for both teams stayed on the ice and readied themselves for the face-off. The game began.

The next day Doris was cutting coupons from the paper at the kitchen table. William sat opposite her reading the paper.

“I have to go shopping. We have nothing in the house. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” William said. “They won the first game of the championship series. What's more important than that?”

Doris raised her eyes and said, “Dear God. I do hope there's hockey in heaven. For my family's sake.”

“Actually, I'm thinking about going up to Toronto today and make a visit to that Fred Harrington character.”

Doris leaned into William real close. “You’ll no such thing. You've done some stupid things in your life, but interfering with your son's life like that ... that would take the cake.”

William held up his hand as if he didn’t want to hear the diatribe that was coming next.

“Okay. Okay. Enough said,” William said.

As Doris left she added, “Don't. I mean it, William. Don’t interfere.”

The Badgers won the third game of the championship season and now led the series two to one. However, Greensburg won the next two games which meant the Badgers had to win the remain two games if they wanted to win the championship. As fate would have it, game six was hard played and the Badgers won by one point. During that game, PJ got checked real hard and ended up at the hospital the next day.

PJ was watching TV from a bed in the hospital of the highlights of game six of the series. He saw himself get checked in a replay and winced just as the doctor walked in.

“You’re lucky, PJ,” the Doctor said, “There was no concussion. Your jaw is just bruised. But I'm going to repeat what I said the last time we talked. Hang up the skates, PJ. You’re playing with life and death.”

Before leaving, PJ looked the doctor in the eye. “No offense, Doctor, ” PJ said, “but you

got to be out of your mind if you think I'm going to miss game seven of a championship series. No way. I live in a Pittsburgh town, doc. I'd never be able to live it down.”

Just before game seven of the championship series, a newspaper reporter was in one corner of the locker room interviewing Malecki. Dave Hansen, the reporter from Gazette, was in the locker room as well with PJ. While PJ was getting dressed for the game, Dave asked PJ if there was a hex on the Badgers. “Some people say,” Dave said, “you can’t win the big game.”

“That's cockypuck,” PJ said. “Excuse me, but I gotta get ready, Dave.”

And with that, Dave left. Malecki, however, loved the attention and was in his glory as the News Reporter continued to interview him. The camera was pointed directly at Malecki as the Reporter told Malecki that a Penguin scout was in the stands. “Are you going to show him a thing or two?”

“I'll show him things he hasn't seen before,” Malecki said as he finished getting dressed for the game.

PJ saw the Tau Cross dangling on the hook by his locker door. He removed the cross, kissed it, put it around his neck, and then tucked it in his shirt. He looked around for its donor. No one was looking back except Malecki. He just smiled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When PJ was announced, he jumped onto the ice from the home team runway at the Badger Hockey Arena, and waved to the roaring fans.

He was the last to be announced and he took his position with the rest of the team. Everyone sobered up and listened to The National Anthem with reverence. When it was over, the crowd roared its approval, and in the press box, Announcer Phil said, “This is it, Brent. The whole season coming down to this game.”

Both announcers gave the play-by-play action of both teams, and when Malecki made a perfect across-the-ice pass, Brent said, “Malecki is skating brilliantly.” Malecki then took the puck right back and scored. PJ jumped to feet as did the rest of the fans.

When PJ got his chance, he played brilliantly as well. He avoided a check, then took the puck in and scored. Malecki score another goal. PJ score twice and had one assist.

Greensburg scored four times, which had Father Felix biting his fingernails down to the bone almost.

Coach Thomas nodded to Jack and said, “Switch.”

Malecki's linemates took to the ice as three forwards came off.

PJ sat on the bench and looked up at the clock. There was less than two minutes to go in the final period.

In the Announcers Booth, Brent and Phil were wide-eye and alert.

“Can you believe this, Phil. There’s two minutes left to play, and Malecki and PJ both have a hat trick going for them. I swear, I've never seen this kind of play by two players on the same team. Even if Greensburg wins, one of these men deserves the MVP for this series. Too

bad they don't have two players win if this ends in a tie for the championship scoring crown.”

“Brent, the MVP for the final series has never been given to anyone on the losing side. But that doesn't mean it can't happen. And I don't need to remind anyone, the Badgers haven't lost, yet. It's a tied game and anything can happen. I don't need to remind anyone that if Greensburg scores, they win, and the Scoring championship goes to Malecki, because he is one point ahead of PJ.”

As the play resumed on the ice, the checking got particularly nasty. Jeff got checked and he fell hard. He got up slowly, but no penalty was called.

Coach Thomas went over to PJ and tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Switch.” PJ jumps onto the ice.

Malecki, at Center, and PJ, at Right Wing, skated defensively to try and get the puck back. Greensburg shot and missed.

Greensburg got the puck back almost immediately and tried to pass the puck around, stalling, waiting for an end-game shot. The clock reads 30 seconds left and counting.

Rogie snuck from behind one of the Greensburg players and knocked the puck loose. Malecki retrieved it and for PJ it was if the sound around him lowered twenty decibels and softened. All he heard was his own breathing, and the breathing of other players around him.

Malecki stood alone, motionless. He scouted the entire arena with one look. His eyes met PJ's. Malecki nodded and PJ nodded back,

For PJ, the roar of the crowd was still muted as Malecki took off with the puck between opposing players. He passed to PJ starting a sequence of passes that showed the skating and passing skill of PJ and Malecki, and rarely found even in the big leagues.

PJ and Malecki pass the puck back and forth, faking out the Gators' defense left and right

along the way, and delighting the crowd. Still, the noise was muted for PJ. He only heard their breathing and sounds of steel slashing the ice as he skated past the offenders and passed the puck to Malecki.

With the final, unselfish assist from Malecki, PJ shot the puck into the net with one second left. The Badgers won the Championship Series, and PJ won the scoring championship by one point.

A buzzer sounded for the end of the game, and the ambient noise from the crowd came back to PJ as if he were in a movie. Mayhem erupted, and the announcers yelled into the mic, “The Badgers score” over and over again inciting the crowd even more.

Malecki had to yell above the noise for PJ to hear him. “That was the greatest skating I’ve ever seen in my life, PJ,” Malecki said.

Malecki holds up his hand and they high-five each other.

“As was yours, of course.”

“Naturally,” Malecki said.

PJ raised his head and pointed his index finger to the heavens . He took out his Tau Cross and kissed it. Then lost himself in adulation of his teammates were displaying with their backslapping antics.

In the Badger locker room, a couple of hours later, the Championship Cup sat on the table outside the coach’s office for all to see. Next to the cup was a Most Valuable Player award won by PJ. Coach Thomas came out of the office to a celebrating team.

“Gallagher, front and center,” the Coach yelled out.

“A Penguin Scout is in his office,” Steve said. “This is it, PJ. You’re moving up.”

“Your mouth to God’s ear,” PJ said as he headed for Thomas's office. Other players slapped him on the back and conveyed their sentiments as he passed by.

In Coach Thomas’ office, the scout stood as soon as PJ entered.

The Coach introduced PJ to the Penguin scout. After shaking hands and taking their seats, the scout congratulated him on his play.

“PJ,” the scout started in sort of a glum tone, “a decision was made before this game to take certain actions to streamline the organization. We knew that we had a great minor league player in you. There's no doubt in my mind that you'll be in the minor league hall of fame soon.”

“You're cutting me, aren't you?”

The scout looked at Thomas, then back at PJ. “I knew you were smart, but not that smart.” The scout paused for a moment then continued, “PJ, it's a proven statistic that once a player has more than one concussion, he represents a high medical risk. Hospital costs are enormous and represent a large part of our budget. If we are not prudent in our decisions ...”

“You're not getting any younger, PJ. You're cut, and that's that.”

“We don’t have to do it that way, Coach.” The scouted waited before he continued. “Please understand, PJ.”

“I understand. I truly do.” PJ got up and they shook hands.

“Patrick,” the scout said, “We are not going to make the announcement for another month. So, if you choose to retire and avoid the embarrassment ...”

“Oh, yeah,” PJ said, interrupting the Scout. “Embarrassing to who? I won the scoring championship and I was the MVP in the champion series and the Penguins cut me? Are you sure you're not trying to avoid embarrassing yourself?” As PJ headed for the door, the Scout said that the league always had coaching needs and he could make a couple of phone calls,

“I may take you up on that, but right now let me digest on what is going on.” And with that, PJ left.

“That was not easy,” the Scout said, “A great hockey player walks in that body. We made a mistake a couple of years ago by not bringing him up. We just had too many forwards.”

“Agh. I see,” the Coach said with a sarcastic tone. “You need a moment of bereavement yourself. You want me to go and come back?”

“You’re a real Pip, Thomas. Bring in Malecki. We’re not going to make the same mistake with him.”

William was driving in his car on the highway. The tollbooth came into view at the Canadian border. He pulled up to pay and show his passport.

After the attendant inspected the car, William learned it was 90 miles to Toronto. So, William used his GPS system, found Harrington’s house, and drove into a residential area and parked the car much in the same way PJ did. William walked up to the same house where PJ went to and knocked on the door. After a few seconds, Fred Harrington came to the door.

While PJ was talking on the phone with Lauren, he walked into the living room and fondled the MVP trophy that sat on the mantle piece in the living room.

“Two days,” Lauren said. “I’ll be home in two days.”

“Oh, thank, God. It’s been a long wait, honey.”

“I missed you more than you know.”

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

”Call me tomorrow,” PJ said. “And tell me what time to pick you up.” They said their

goodbyes, and PJ answered the door. The mail carrier wanted PJ to sign for a registered letter.

William came into the kitchen from the garage. He had his goggles over his head, and was sweating from working in the garage. He poured himself a cup of coffee as PJ entered.

“What's this?” PJ said as he handed William the letter. William became elated as he read it.

“You're a finalist!” William shouted. “That's great news.”

“A finalist?” PJ repeated. “A finalist in what?”

“Oh. I have a confession, PJ. There's no way to say this, except that I was snooping in your room and I found your manuscript. I sent it in to the OPUS competition because ...”

“Excuse me,” PJ interrupted. “You did what?”

William tried to explain to PJ that he could win some big bucks and get published if he won, and twenty-grand was nothing to sneeze at, or at least that was what William told PJ. But PJ objected. “You went into my room and stole my manuscript?” he said.

“I didn't steal it,” William said. “I copied it and I put the original back.”

PJ left the kitchen and walked straight for the front door. William followed him. “You had no right to invade my privacy like that,” PJ said. “How could you do that?”

“Guilty,” William said.

PJ opened the front door and walked out and William followed.

William stopped at the porch and watched PJ walk down the driveway.

“You had no right to submit my book without my permission,” PJ yelled over his shoulder.

“I'm guilty of that, too,” William said.

“And you had no right to change what I wrote to ‘make it better’.”

When PJ reached his car, William said, “I didn't change a word. Not a single word.”

PJ stopped and faced his father and listened to what William had to say, maybe for the first time ever. While William was talking, PJ realized what he was putting his adopted father through all these years. PJ realized that his father put on a brave face all this time. So, PJ changed his demeanor because he finally understood the worth, the sacrifice, and the love his adopted-father had given him throughout the years, including absorbing this ‘faux pas’ as his mistake rather than the loving gesture it was. William didn’t do it out of spite, or anger or any negative attribute one might bestow on an adversary. William did it out of love and the knowledge that PJ was, after all, a better writer than William was. Finally, PJ understood this.

He walked up to his father, hesitated for a brief second, then hugged him as if he was never going to see him again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PJ's daydream at the Opus Award Ceremony was interrupted by the MC words were introducing PJ as the winner of this year's OPUS award.

"We have a special winner this year," he said. "He's not a writer by trade. Normally, our winner is a journalist who is a wanna-be novelist ..." The MC paused for the laughter to subside, then picked up the rhetoric. "Like I said in the beginning, this year's winner is not a bona fide novelist, or screenwriter, mystery writer ... or had any of those attributes. This year a hockey player has won the OPUS Award. Won't you welcome, Patrick J. Gallagher."

PJ's family, Tom, Phil, Father Felix, Lauren and Doris, sat at the same table as him. They all stood up clapping and patted him on the shoulder as he passed by.

At the podium, he tucked his Tau Cross in his shirt and waited for everyone to sit back down. William was the last to sit down, and seemed a little nervous as he alternately looked at his watch and the back door. At the end of his double takes, Fred Harrington entered from the back of the room. He searched for a seat and found one just as he spotted William. They nodded to each other.

PJ saw Fred, then looked at William and instantly knew that Fred was there because of William.

PJ broke out in a smile, as he mouthed the words 'Thank you' to William and said the same words in the microphone to the MC.

As the applause subsided, he began his acceptance speech.

"I can appreciate what Mr. Townsend just said," PJ began. "I'm a hockey player, not a

writer. But I wrote this story using the same single tool as I used to play hockey. Passion. I had passion for pushing a puck up and down the ice, and I enjoy writing where no one is looking over my shoulder, unlike hockey.” PJ waited for the laughs to subside.

“The joy of skating. Competition. I had passion for the game, for sure. But I had passion for finding out who I was, as well. While writing my story I found out that I was unique. I found out some very interesting things during that journey.”

PJ would eventually marry Lauren. But little did he know that his first child would be adopted, and he would take him to many visits to the outside ice park. There, at the park, he took videos of his boy skating, or trying to skate. He would save this video because in it Fred Harrington would come, and that made the video very special to him.

PJ, William and Fred would take turns videoing the growth of the child, and of the family. Anyone who viewed the videos could see the camaraderie they would all have among PJ, Fred, William, Lauren, Doris and, of course, the boy.

Fred captured Lauren skating after PJ. She would catch him, of course, and throw him into the snowdrift and jump on him. Their love had grown to the point beyond what he had hoped for during those last years as a Badger.

In one video, William skated into view with two hockey sticks. He put the sticks down next to the bench and sat down next to Doris who was playing with their grandson. The boy fell and William picked him up and put him back on his feet.

William got up with the two hockey sticks and he held out his free hand to take the camera. What he did that that video caught flashing glimpses of the sky, the ground, the park, then the camera focused on Fred Harrington who now had the two hockey sticks in his hands.

He skated towards PJ. He handed one stick to PJ and they fake a face off. PJ got the better of Fred and skated around him with the puck. PJ skated over to William and took the camera. After some jerky moves, the camera settled on William doing a face off with Fred. The video then showed a quick glimpse of Father Felix reaching for the camera. There was another series of jittery moves and then William appeared in the frame. He got into the fray by chasing PJ and checking him into a snow drift. William couldn't stop laughing as he went flying into the snowdrift as well. Fred skated by them, and William and PJ got up and chased after Fred.

“I was told I was adopted from the beginning by Doris and William Gallagher. They told me they chose me from a hundred babies. In that sense, I was special, I guess. But this idea of trying to find out who I am came late in life. I didn't do it because I had a major illness and I needed to know my families medical history, or anything like that. Maybe it was a mid-life crisis. I don't know. I told people I wanted to prove to my birth parents that they made a mistake in letting me go by becoming successful hockey player. I paid so much attention to the sport all my life that I had room for nothing else. I didn't know what else I could do, really. I was afraid of committing to a beautiful woman who I loved. I was afraid of the failures that awaited me beyond hockey. I was afraid of competition. The operative word here is afraid. Nevertheless, I went in search for my birth-parents and I found out a few things on the way.”

“I found out that I was in love. Deeply in love. And there was no need to be afraid of commitment. My heart loved unconditionally, and what a wonderful endorphin that is.

“I might adopt a child of my own even if Lauren and I can have children. Our first child will be that very special child who might need to be reassured a little bit more than other children. We will say that we have selected him or her above hundreds of other children because

we heard some god-like voice that said 'This is the one. This is the one.'

“Something else I realized while writing this story was how superficial my wants were and how important my adopted parents were to me. I realized that they sacrificed a lot for me over the years. I am so thankful to them for the person I am today, and for the new life I'm going to lead.

“I am so looking forward to the new adventures that lay before me and the new people who will come into my life. I am so grateful and thank God a thousand times for the people who believed in me when I doubted myself, and for those who stood by me when I had a hard time standing up by myself. And if I may paraphrase Oscar Wilde and add a word or two of my own: ‘Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older, they judge them; and when they become parents themselves, they forgive them.’ I thank you all for this honor, and I thank my adopted parents for the inspiration that helped me achieve it.

THE END