

Knowing





Merry Christmas 2018



**In Memory of my brother David.
1955—2018
Gone to Soon.
May You Rest In Peace**



Chapter 1

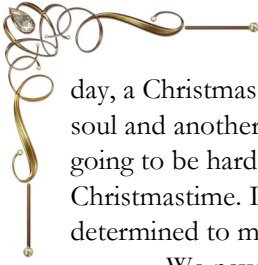
The sheets were soft. The quiet softness that seems to spring from white sheets freshly laundered. I never knew why white sheets seemed so different, a bit softer or a bit more snuggly. They just did. I mean, I have slept in red sheets. They felt warm but insisted on action instead of rest. Blue sheets were cool. The light blue were airy, encouraging rest but more a fullness of the heart, not snuggly comfort. It was all probably in my mind. Sheets were sheets, right? Color didn't matter. Only the texture and quality of the linen. Still, I rested better under clean white sheets. Under a gloomy or disappointing day, I preferred to climb into a warm bed beneath white sheets.

I thought of that while I lay between the sheets of the bed. I curled my toes and felt the sheets envelope me. The smallest of smiles escaped my lips, then a sigh. As nice as white sheets were they just couldn't make up for the absence on the other side of the bed. I rolled onto my back. I still wasn't able to sleep in the center. I still had a side. My side. The side farthest away from the bathroom. And I had to go. Now. Sheesh. It was so far away and the trip was so cold.



Another strong suggestion from my bladder convinced me to push back the white sheets and heavy comforter. My feet hit the floor and I hurried to the restroom. I hoped that what little time each foot spent on the floor would negate the chill sending shivers through my body. All I could really think of was that God should bless the person that invented heated bathroom floors. I knew I was blessing him or her as my foot touched my heated tiles.

Relief consumed me as I finished nature's requirements. The sunshine peering through sheer curtains covering the window reminded me the day awaited. Another



day, a Christmas in which you were absent. Sadness filled my soul and another tear fell across my cheek. This Christmas was going to be hard. Still, it was Christmas and I loved Christmastime. I wiped away the remaining tears and determined to move on, one of your last requests.

We never started decorating until December 1st, just wasn't right. Christmas wasn't until December and decorating

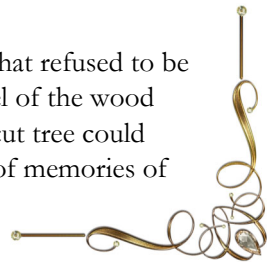


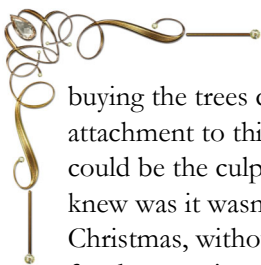
before December invaded November's Thanksgiving Day. Then on December 1st the boxes came out. I groaned out loud at the thought. You never threw any Christmas decoration away. The boxes got heavier and more plentiful each Christmas as I got weaker and older. Getting the boxes out became such a heavy chore. Still the grin and smile as you unpacked each item, remembered each trinket and the story behind them filled my heart.

Without you the boxes came out in less than an orderly or timely fashion. Truthfully it was not only physically hard, emotionally it was a land mine. Tears fell on more than one occasion as well as those times I had to stop to settle a few outright sobs. But the boxes came out and the lights went up. Today was the day I bought the tree. A fresh evergreen to fill the space next to the television. Not those silly artificial ones.

I had been told time and again of the benefits of an artificial tree. How light they were, not heavy at all. No watering. No pine needles on the floor. No disposing of them after the holidays. No cost. Buy one and done. If you put the money into it they even came with their own lights, blinking, static or in tune with a favorite carol. You could even get ones with a 'fresh' evergreen smell courtesy of embedded scent crystals. Still I always purchased fresh.

Maybe it was the lopsided branches that refused to be perfectly straight for display. Could be the feel of the wood under my hands. I knew the smell of a fresh cut tree could never really be duplicated. Even the decades of memories of





buying the trees could be the emphasis for attachment to this tired tradition. Any or all could be the culprit. I didn't know. All I knew was it wasn't Christmas, at least my Christmas, without a fresh tree. So, I dressed for the occasion, fired up the old pickup out front and headed to the tree lot.



Jules greeted me as I parked my truck and climbed out of the cab. Jules Feinstein was his real name. Jewish all the way from head to toe. Although the lot bore the simple name 'Jules' Christmas Trees' the owner and proprietor was a little Jewish man I had known for over 40 years. He figured out early on it wouldn't hurt to make a few more dollars doing a service to his Christian friends. Those that knew him didn't figure it made a difference either. He was a good man that did more than his fair share for the community.

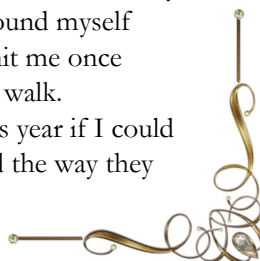
"You want I should send Joe with you to set up your tree this year?" Jules asked after we greeted each other warmly.

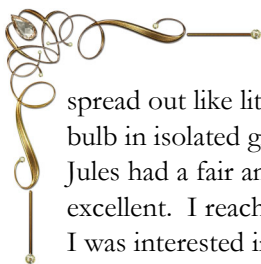
"Not this year. I can handle it one more time, I think." I grinned in response. Jules and I had found that happiness came in moments. A whole day of happiness was rare. A whole week was almost non-existent. We measured our happiness in moments and I wanted this happy moment for myself. "I'll call if I need someone."

"You do that. I'll send him over right away." Jules turned to greet another old friend and family.

I walked to the mini forest of cut Christmas trees and wandered amongst them. I took my time. It was neither cold nor warm and I was in no hurry. Even if I was, time and health had taken more than a few steps from my stride. I held out my hand to find yours. It came back empty and I found myself looking for you. In a few moments realization hit me once more. I shook my head and proceeded with my walk.

A good Frasier Fir would be a prize this year if I could find it. I liked the shortness of the branches and the way they





spread out like little hands. Each finger could hold a simple bulb in isolated glory while lights draped over their needles. Jules had a fair amount this year and I found the pickings excellent. I reached over and made sure I could heft each one I was interested in purchasing. The tree wouldn't be the tallest I had ever had as much as the one I could handle. A six-foot bundle of green seemed about right with just the perfect amount of foliage and limbs.

I signaled over to Joe. It wasn't too long before he had grabbed the tree, prepped and wrapped it and placed it into the back of the pickup. I went over to Jules to pay up after giving Joe a proper tip and smile.

"Shelley's about 5?" Jules asked after we had settled up.

"Shelley's. Five." I replied. Shelley's was our local watering hole. Jules, Akeem and Father Jonas and I had been meeting there for years, mostly for companionship, often to take a moment from our family and troubles of the day. The food was good. Kosher for Jules, hamburgers and steaks for me and Jonas, even some manakeesh for Akeem if he didn't grab more conventional fare. It was here we offered sympathy and support when Jules lost his Esther. It was here they also gathered for me when you passed.

I crawled into my truck, waved at Jules and made my way back to the house. It took more than two hours and frequent rest periods to place the tree upright and where I wanted it, but I got it done. Pleased with myself I looked at the clock and realized I should clean up so I could get to Shelley's.





Chapter 2

Now Shelley's was no one's romantic destination. It stood as a single-story building in the older part of town. Families ate there, along with everyday common folk. Nothing was fancy, not even the entrance or the sign on the building. If you didn't know it was a restaurant you might have passed on by. The windows looking out onto the parking lot weren't panoramic and reminded many a patron of the windows at their home. The sign above the door was a simple blue neon probably made last century. It glowed when the eatery was opened and was turned off when it closed. But the locals knew Shelley's and on all-you-can eat Sunday chicken a line would form around the block.

I pulled open the single glass door that barred entrance and was greeted by Pat. The dinner buzz was picking up, still she was very much in charge.

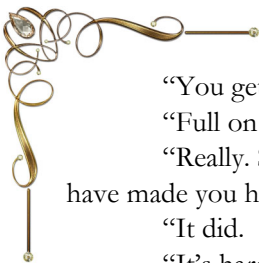


"Usual table, Barney. Jules is waiting for you." Pat waved a menu to point the direction. I nodded and made my way to the table.

As regulars and serious consumers of Shelley's finest offerings Pat placed us near the back next to the kitchens.

While that may offend others, Pat knew we liked our food hot. We also like to talk to Sam, the cook and we liked to talk in general. Boy did we like to talk. Putting us in this little island of isolation ensured we could dine for hours and no one was offended. I mean we often took advantage leaving closer to nine than six on many occasions.

I plopped down on one of the seats and found my beverage hitting the table at the same time. I grinned at Brenda, the waitress and she smiled as she moved on to the next customer.



“You getting a sandwich?” Jules asked.

“Full on steak with potatoes and mushrooms.”

“Really. Sam will be thrilled. Putting up the tree must have made you hungry.”

“It did. Plus, I haven’t eaten regular in days.”

“It’s hard getting used to a new schedule. Start to realize you often ate because she said it was time to eat, not because you were hungry.”

“That is true, Jules.”

“What is true? How does Jules know anything is true?” Akeem asked as he sat down.

“I know plenty of things that are true. I know you eat too much.” Jules pointed at Akeem’s large stomach covered by a large brown sweater vest.

“Not true. I don’t eat too much. I eat just enough to keep this belly this large.” Akeem patted his ample girth and laughed. The laughter was punctuated by Father Jonas pulling up a chair.

“Picking on Akeem again, Jules?”

“He doesn’t look after himself. I worry.” Jules took a sip of hot coffee and smiled at Akeem.

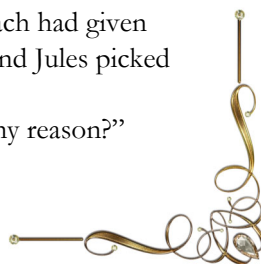
“Thanks for the concern, brother. My wife and kids thank you as well. But I will still have the chocolate cake for dessert.”

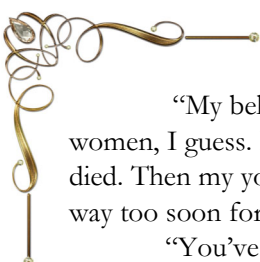
“Well, it is Shelley’s chocolate cake. Not really fair.” I looked at the dessert menu and considered other options with my meal.

“I agree. A perfect morsel of temptation.” Father Jonas piped in as Brenda landed his hot chocolate on the table.

Jules nodded in agreement and placed his order with Brenda. She followed around the table until each had given their preferences. Brenda headed off to Sam and Jules picked up the conversation.

“You seem at peace, Barney. Nice. Any reason?”





“My belief in the inherent goodness of men and women, I guess. It took a hit these last few years. First my wife died. Then my younger brother David passed away this year, way too soon for my liking.”

“You’ve not had the best of luck, my friend.” Akeem nodded in agreement.

“But then, I remembered the blessings. Jules you were the first to show up to my door. Akeem, your wife and children made sure I had food, clean clothes and my house never suffered. Father Jonas. You took my hand and led me through the darkness of preparations, memorials, and the funeral itself even though Martha and I were not of your religion. I held on because of all of you, your inherent goodness.”



I held each one’s face in my memory as I looked across the table. It was an awkward moment for my friends. Unexpected and appreciated, but never necessary. A sincere moment of thanks was never required, but one I wanted to acknowledge.

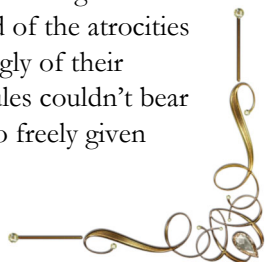
“So, Jonas, I have achieved a bit of peace these days.” I continued and raised my small glass. “To friendship.”

They returned the reply in unison. The moment quickly interrupted when the appetizers hit the table.

“Anyone see the news these days?” Jules picked up the conversation after a few bites.

“You’re talking about the immigrants being locked up again?” Akeem asked.

To Jules the immigration problems were always his problems. It was a sensitive subject. He was a second-generation immigrant and heard the stories his parents told of the atrocities in their home country. They always spoke lovingly of their adopted country and how it saved their lives. Jules couldn’t bear to see his country deny others what had been so freely given them.



“Yes, the immigrants. It is a shame. A shame. I sometimes wonder if even Jesus would be allowed in these days.” Jules took a shot at Father Jonas.

“Jules, I sometimes wonder the same thing.” Father Jonas didn’t take the bait, but rather sighed forlornly at the thought.

The conversations became more political, then more spiritual, then pragmatic as each topic was dissected and discussed. We finally solved all the world’s problems for the night and asked for the checks. It was another late night closer to 9 than 8:30 before we all began to leave. A stretch, a quick trip to the restroom, and a hefty tip for Christmas for Brenda found us out the door and on our separate ways.



Chapter 3

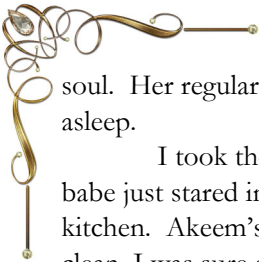
Christmas season nights came early. This was no different as I found myself turning onto my street. The Christmas lights were on and twinkling, until I turned into my driveway. No lights, yet. It will take some time and may be a few of those laser lights, but lights will be bright at this house I assured myself.

I opened the door to the truck and creaked my bones into a standing position. It was a quiet sob in the dark of the doorway. I barely heard it, but I did hear it. I braced myself against whatever could be there, and I walked quietly up to the front door. Or as quietly as an old man with too many pounds can walk quietly. A small woman was sitting there cowering in the corner just behind one of the front porch columns in a cove meant for a plant or large ornament.

She was small, tiny in fact. Emaciated would have been a generous term. Her hair fell as a tangled mess over a torn and worn garment that at best could be described as a slip. It was filthy and barely hid her legs that she had drawn up inside the rag. Her bare feet appeared calloused and blistered. I barely could discern the child in her arms. I stared blankly at my form as if all its tears had been cried dry.



Shocked was a good word. Flabbergasted came to mind when I saw the child. I squatted down best I could and reached out my hand. She took it and stood as I beckoned her with my strength. I leaned in, unlocked the door and opened it. I led her in and took her to the couch. The smell of the Christmas tree mingled and then overtook the stench of her current life. She sat down and I gave her a blanket. Nothing was said. Nothing need be said. She laid her head down on the pillow, with her babe in her arms. Soon the warmth filled her



soul. Her regular breathing indicated she had finally fallen asleep.

I took the baby from her arms. It made no sound. The babe just stared into my soul, unblinking. I moved to the kitchen. Akeem's daughter had a baby when she came to clean. I was sure she left a bit of formula in the house just in case. After opening a few cabinets, I found it. A quick read of the directions, some alterations to kitchen equipment and a heating pan soon found a full bottle of formula ready to eat for the babe.



When I place the nipple to the lips it suckled. A more wonderful sound could not have been heard. The blank eyes became warm. A tear fell across one small cheek warming up and snuggling against my chest. The child ate the entire bottle. I placed it over my shoulder and patted the back. A comforting burp released the sadness of its existence. I brought the baby back to my arms. Its little mouth yawned such a big yawn. Its little fingers stretched out and then it snuggled back into my arms. The child fell asleep immediately. The benefits of childhood being a forgiving memory.

"Hello." The voice was soft, childlike. Her eyes were so large as she looked my way.

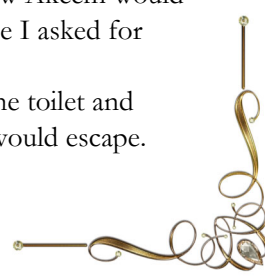
"Hello."

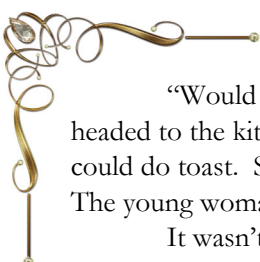
"Restroom?"

I gave her directions and she rose from the couch to make her way down the hall. I continued to hold the babe and reached for the phone. "Akeem, can you and Samira come over, please. And bring some baby things."

The conversation was brief, but I knew Akeem would come. Samira would demand it, especially since I asked for baby things.

The young woman came back from the toilet and reached for the child. She held it tight as if it would escape.





“Would you like something to eat?” I stood and headed to the kitchen. I had eggs. I knew eggs. And toast. I could do toast. So, I set about making a late-night breakfast. The young woman just watched every movement.

It wasn’t too long before Akeem came in the front door. No knocking. He just walked in concerned with the call.

“So, you just walk in now? You own the house?” Samira was yelling at him.

“He called in the middle of the night asking for baby items. It’s not right. I am worried.”

The young lady stood and moved back toward the wall and me. She looked in terror as if she would dart out the door at any moment. I touched her on the shoulder and smiled.



“They are friends. There here to help.” I comforted first, then turned to Akeem. That conversation went nowhere.

“Ah, a baby!” Samira squealed, and bee lined for the woman and infant. In a moment she had the child in her arms and the woman at her side on the couch. “Akeem, call Dina. Tell her to bring some clothes for the woman and the child. Also, some food.”

Akeem had barely laid down the few baby things he had brought when Jules and Joe walked in the front door.

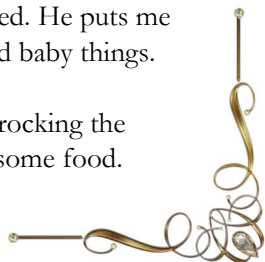
“So, you leave the front door open. What if someone walks in?”

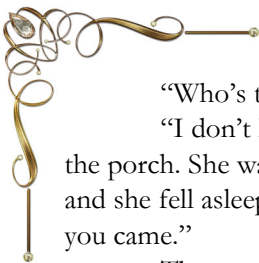
“Like you?” Akeem replied. “Good point. I remember to close the door from now on?”

“Jules? What are you doing here?” I was placing the bits of food on a plate and taking it to the woman.

“I was talking to Akeem when you called. He puts me on hold and then tells me you called and needed baby things. So, I came.”

Akeem was on the phone. Samira was rocking the baby and I was trying to give the poor woman some food.





“Who’s the lady?” Jules asked.

“I don’t know. We never got that far. Found her on the porch. She was crying. Put her on the couch, held the baby and she fell asleep. I called Akeem, so Samira could help. Then you came.”

The woman looked as confused as I did but appreciated the help and the food. Jules took a wrap from one of the chairs and handed it to her. She wrapped it around her body and moved closer to Samira and the baby.

“Did you see? She is in a hospital gown. I think she has some blood on it?” Jules worried.

I hadn’t really noticed because of all the commotion. But a second look confirmed Jules’ observation.

“Think she is from the hospital?” I asked.

“No. But I think I know where she came from. I can’t believe it. But I would bet on it.” Jules moved closer to the young woman. “Mary?”

The woman looked up at her name and nodded. A look of concern clouded her eyes. Jules smiled and backed off.

“Barney, I believe you have Mary and Jesús in your living room.” Jules

“Hey-sus, spelled like Jesus, but with an accent over the ‘u,’” I replied.

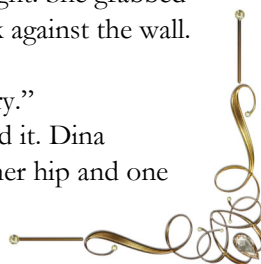
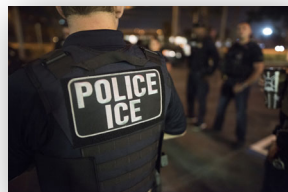
“You mean I got Mary and Jesús in my living room before Christmas.”

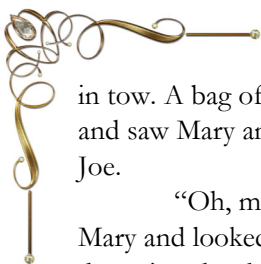
“I think so. The mother and child that escaped from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, you know ICE, a couple of days ago. How the hell did they get this far?” Jules started speaking to himself. “I mean, it has to be a three-day trip from Texas.”

A knock on the door set Mary in a fright. She grabbed her child from Samira and stood with her back against the wall. I moved forward and spoke quietly.

“It’s alright. It’s just Dina. Don’t worry.”

Akeem moved to the door and opened it. Dina walked in, none too happy with one child on her hip and one





in tow. A bag of baby supplies in the one hand. She turned and saw Mary and quickly stopped chastising her father and Joe.

“Oh, mama. A baby.” Dina moved forward right up to Mary and looked closely at the child in her arms. She reached down into her bags and produced another formula bottle. She handed it to Mary who placed it in Jesús mouth. She, Mary, and Samira sat on the couch and began digging through the items Dina had brought.

“Does she speak English Samira?” Akeem asked. Samira shook her head no and held up another onesie to see if it fit the baby. It seemed strange to us that women could communicate about babies even though they couldn’t speak the same language.

Jules was reaching for the phone.

“Who you calling?” I was concerned. I didn’t know who I was gonna call or wanted to call yet. I just knew I wanted what was right for this woman and child.

“Father Jonas. He speaks Spanish. He can interpret.”



Chapter 4

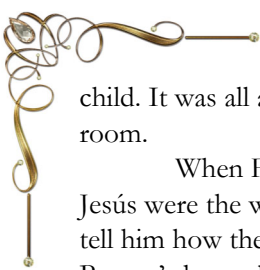
It had taken Father Jonas about forty-five minutes to get here, but he came. Meanwhile the ladies had bathed the child, clothed the mother and made a cradle out of blankets and pillows. With little else to do but mutter and stutter until Father Jonas arrived I started putting lights on the tree and trimming it up. It kept my mind at ease and my hands busy. Joe grabbed a few lights as well and the star for the top. Between the four of us the tree was nearly finished by the time Father Jonas had arrived.



During that time Jules brought us up to date on the story of Mary and Jesús. Apparently, Mary and her husband Joseph (the father had to be Joseph, I said to myself) walked to a border town to seek a new life in America. They got separated at the border. Mary went into labor and had the child. The border patrol took her into a clinic to help her when ICE showed up. It all got fuzzy after that.

ICE claimed they were there to take both into custody and process them for possible asylum. The people at the clinic said ICE took Jesús from his bassinette without Mary's permission and were walking out of the room without Mary. Mary screamed and grabbed her child. In the melee Mary escaped with her baby, some say with the help of people at the clinic. In any event ICE has been trying to find Mary and put her and the baby back in custody.

It had become a national scandal. Mary claimed the child was born in the United States and was a U.S. citizen. ICE said they couldn't confirm it. Meanwhile we were treated to scenes of Joseph behind barbed-wire trimmed chain linked cages screaming to get out and find his wife and



child. It was all a mess and apparently sitting in my front room.

When Father Jonas arrived, he did confirm Mary and Jesús were the woman and child in the news. They wouldn't tell him how they got there, but told him Mary chose Barney's house because it was vacant and seemed abandoned since no lights were on outside or in. Mary didn't know where to go or what to do next. But she was scared of the police and government. She was sure they wanted to take her baby. These revelations, for the moment, left all of the decisions in our lap. The future of the baby, the mother and maybe even our beliefs.



I sighed at the revelation, moved over to the light switch and flipped on the tree lights. The star at the top shown the brightest it had in a long time. Mary looked over at the tree and gasped in awe. The baby cooed in delight.

“What do you want to do, Barney?” Jules was very invested in this decision. What we did meant a lot to him. It was personal on many levels.

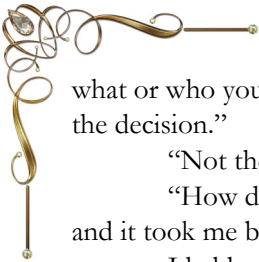
“Well we can't call the police or sheriff's department. This isn't a sanctuary city or county. They would haul her off and who knows what would happen to the child. Bedside's after what happened she is terrified of them. She could kill herself if they took that baby from her or even touched it. Wouldn't want that on my hands.”

We all four nodded in agreement. It was odd we had consensus on anything.

“What's your faith, Barney. What do you believe in?” Father Jonas asked.

“Hardly seems the time, Jonas. Seems there is more important things to do.” I was confused at the question.

“Don't think there is a better time. The fate of Mary, Joseph, and Jesús may be in your hands at Christmas. How,



what or who you believe in may have very real significance in the decision.”

“Not the same people, Jonas.”

“How do you know, Barney?” It was a real question and it took me by surprise.

I held my thoughts then began. “Well, I don’t believe, Jonas. I know.

Jules, Akeem and Father Jonas all looked quizzically

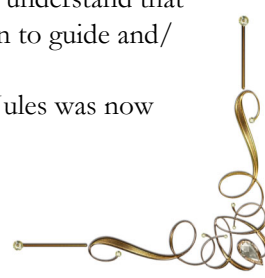
at my response. I continued. “René Descartes and his writings of 1637. The beginning of science. It defined the physical world, too much so for many. But it also confirmed the metaphysical world. Or what a lot of religions and men claim is unknown, the realm of belief, superstition, heaven or hell. What René did was show that if one event existed the other had to exist, because there are always at least two sides to

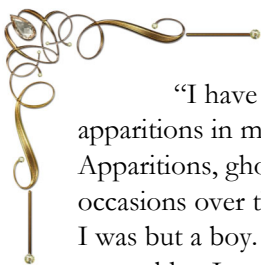
everything. To deny one, is to deny the other. Therefore, my understanding of this theory, demands knowing there is something else, not just believing.”

“Then you believe in Christ, Mohamed and the Torah or in your world know they are true?” Father Jonas pressed.

“I know they can be true. But these figures and books are the product of men. The Bible as you know is a revision of the translation of the German version, based upon the Latin version, written 150 years after the death of the disciples. The Torah’s and Koran’s face similar issues as they were based on oral histories and the interpretations of men. Most religions are a product of men trying to understand that which they cannot and use their interpretation to guide and/or control others and their beliefs.”

“Then how do you know, Barney?” Jules was now pressing.





"I have heard or seen what some would call apparitions in many moments of my life as clear as day. Apparitions, ghosts, angels have come to me on many occasions over the years. At first, I believed them all. But then I was but a boy. All fantasies are real when you are a child. As I grew older, I questioned each and every one. But the visions and encounters never wavered. So, I studied to understand. I became a rationalist. But the rationalism did less to explain the visitations as much as they confirmed them.

Let me ask you something. Maybe it will explain it. When you are in your places of worship or religious shrines and you are surrounded by like believers. When you all pray, pray together, does the mood not change, does the atmosphere not feel different? Do you not feel more connected?"



All nodded in agreement. I finished. "Then you know as well. Scholars may refer to this moment as group think and try to explain it in physical world terms. But it is the metaphysical that surrounds you.

You have invited it in."

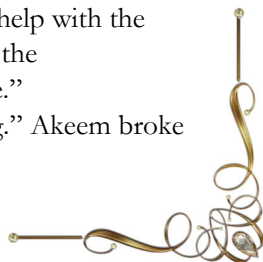
"It's a leap for me, Barney." Father Jonas smiled.

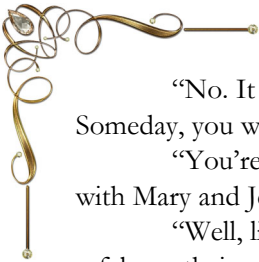
"I suspect it is. But science teaches us that nothing ever totally disappears. That moment when Esther died and when my Martha died, that moment when life just ceased. Do you think their souls lived on? Did their lives just disappear?"

"No." Jules replied.

"I agree. So does physics. I know it is the metaphysical realm their lives went. Without question. The moments before I wake, and I see my Martha. The gentle nudge when I don't quite know what to do. Like calling Akeem to help with the baby. These are all moments that interact with the metaphysical, with those that have gone before."

"Seems more like belief, than knowing." Akeem broke into the conversation.





“No. It is knowing.” Jules affirmed. “He is correct. Someday, you will see.”

“You’re a good man, Barney. So, what should we do with Mary and Jesús?” Akeem asked.

“Well, like their namesakes, we should send them safely on their path. I don’t want to be a Roman soldier on this night. Let’s err on the side of God.”

“I’ve got a large delivery van.” Joe offered. It was the first time he had really spoken all night to the issue at hand. We were dumbstruck for just a brief moment. Then Jules nodded his head in agreement.



Chapter 5

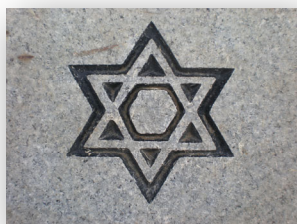
It turned out the Jewish community had a large immigration support system. Lawyers, lots of lawyers, media specialists and numerous safe houses were available. Jules made a call to a Greenburg that lived locally. He called a New York firm that was run by a Liebowitz. In short order arrangements were made to file actions against ICE and the government, including releasing Joseph. All they needed was Mary and the baby in New York to start proceedings.

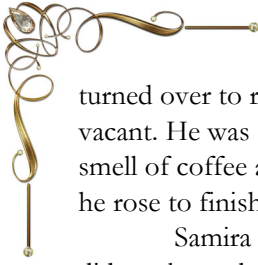
Not to be outdone, Father Jonas has set up church sanctuaries along the route to ensure safety. Farmers, wives, builders and good folks everywhere were making sure Mary and Jesús were getting to New York. Akeem and his community ensured food, water, and fuel were available for the trip along with some personal cash to cover unknown expenses.

All of it was done under the cover of secrecy. No one even hinted to a child, spouse or acquaintance of the government about what was to happen. Everyone prayed for Mary, Joseph, and Jesús safety. It took less than a day to make all arrangements. America was built by immigrants for immigrants. When Americans came together, nothing could stand in the way.

Joe was scheduled to pick up Mary and Jesús at midnight. Samira and Father Jonas stayed with Barney the whole day to make sure the mother and child knew what was happening and get her prepared. It had been a long night, but Barney did manage to get some sleep in. He had curled up under the clean white sheets and slumbered peacefully.

Just as he was about to wake he saw his Martha. She smiled at him so lovingly he thought her alive in his bed. He





turned over to reach for her and once again found her side vacant. He was sad for a moment and then awoke to the smell of coffee and food. The fog of his mind cleared, and he rose to finish nature's callings and join the others.

Samira and Mary had taken over his kitchen. He still did not know how they communicated. It had to be on some mom level men never were meant to understand. When he sat at the table his drink and breakfast was set before him with admonishments to finish everything. Father Jonas had made himself a small bed on the couch. Jules, Akeem, and Joe were out getting things prepared. The Christmas tree lights still shone brightly.

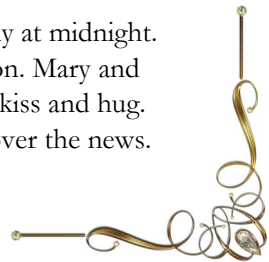
Jesús jostled and cried in the makeshift cradle. Mary moved quickly to pick him up. Samira was preparing a bottle. Circumstances required Mary to get some dishes so in no short time Barney found himself holding a cooing baby in his arms. The child's eyes opened, and a gentle smile filled its face. A warmth filled the room and reality slipped away.

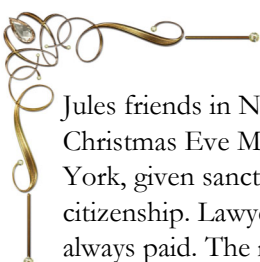
Barney looked toward the tree. Martha stood by its glowing lights looking at the star. Martha's words filled his head as he listened to rather than heard what she was saying. It was a private moment he would forever be grateful for having. It lasted only a moment then the child sighed and closed its eyes. Mary came over and gave Barney a smile and kiss on the forehead.

She took the baby and began its feeding. Barney turned back to his breakfast, content in his decision and his life.



Joe had shown up that night precisely at midnight. The truck was ready and running to perfection. Mary and Jesús got in turned and gave Barney one last kiss and hug. Then they left. Two days later they were all over the news.





Jules friends in New York were as good as their word. By Christmas Eve Mary, Joseph, and Jesús were reunited in New York, given sanctuary and working on asylum and a means for citizenship. Lawyer fees, court fees, and personal expenses were always paid. The money just was there when needed. Akeem never took credit. Neither did Jules or Jonas. But support for the family never wavered.



Shelley's was closing early on Christmas Eve so the guys all decided to meet about noon. Barney sat down at their regular table. Jules was already there.

"The tree sales through the roof this year. Thanks to you my friend."

"I had nothing to do with it, Jules. People just wanted a good live tree this year." I took a sip of my beverage Brenda had placed before me.

"Ha. Word got out my friend. Word got out what you did. This I know. They came to buy where you buy your tree."

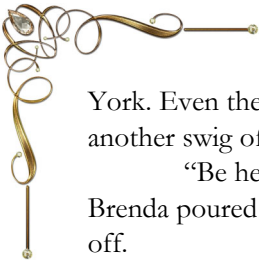
"I never said a thing, Jules. I never let anyone know what we did."

"They didn't hear it from me. Never. My hand to God." Jules continued. "It had to be you. They just know it is you."

"Well some one's telling somebody. Business has never been so good. Attendance has been up at the mosque. People helping, giving. You would think it was our holiday." Akeem settled down into his chair. His coffee ready as Brenda set down the drink.

"Offerings at the church are up, too. We had to add a second Mass. But as God is my witness I never said a word to anyone." Father Jonas was as confused as the rest of us.

"Well, it is making for good theatre. Every television and radio station want to know how Mary and Jesús made it to New



York. Even the government wants to know.” I grabbed another swig of my drink.

“Be hell to pay to get that information from Mary.” Brenda poured some more beverage into my drink to top it off.

We all smiled. We knew that to be true. Sam came over, flipped a chair around and sat down resting his arm on the back of the chair and his chin on the arm.

“You boys making me work hard this year?” Sam grumbled. “Too many people stopping in. Sales up 20% over last year. Had to hire another short order cook to keep up.”

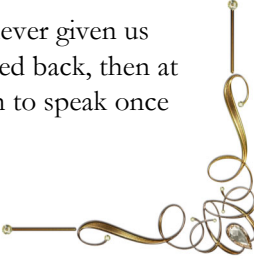
“Not us, Sam. Swear. We know how you like things just as they are.” Akeem chimed in.

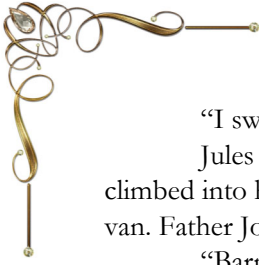
“Well good. Hate to have to ask y’all to leave. What d’ya think about this immigration stuff. Think the new Congress will put a stop to all that separation bullshit?”

The conversation got started and politics was back on the agenda. We laughed, ate and grumbled until our bellies were full and the clock chimed 3. A few of us made our way to the restroom. Another large tip found its way to Brenda. Coats were put on and feet shuffled to the door. Pat met us before we left and placed a small bag in each of our hands.

“Merry Christmas, boys.” Pat smiled, shoved us out the door and locked it behind us.

We were in a bit of shock. Pat had never given us anything but directions and change. We looked back, then at each other. I put up my hands as Jules’ began to speak once again.





“I swear Jules, I never.”

Jules laughed and headed to his car. Akeem climbed into his pickup and Father Jonas walked toward his van. Father Jonas turned at the last moment.

“Barney, I would consider it a favor and an honor if you could make it to midnight mass tonight. I’ll personally save you a seat.”

I saw his sincerity and nodded my assent. It would be nice not to be alone on Christmas Eve. But then again, with my Martha I never really was.







Merry Christmas
and
Happy New Year
2019
from
Old Saint Nick
Himself





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Holiday Season year round.
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