RIDING OUT THE WAGER
The Story of a Damaged Horse & His Soldier

HILARY WALKER
Riding Out the Wager:
The Story of a Damaged Horse & His Soldier

By Hilary C.T. Walker
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Published in the United States of America.

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For the
Warrior Race
and the
Horses Who Heal Them
A Spot of Background to this Book

For Christmas 2016 my son gave me a book by Tim Hayes, entitled “RIDING HOME: The Power of Horses to Heal.”

For some reason, I didn’t start to read it until shortly after our beautiful and generous grey gelding, Callow Double Clover, aka CD, succumbed to cancer at age 26 and was put to sleep in February.

CD had healed many friends (and me) in times of anxiety and maybe that’s why I turned to the book. I found it fascinating. Those of us who are privileged to be around horses understand the saying ‘my therapist lives at the barn.’ It’s no joke – it’s the absolute truth. So I wasn’t surprised to read how horses can help war veterans with PTSD.

But the way they help was particularly interesting.

A New Horse Arrives

With CD gone, I could not take my horse off the farm. His pasture buddy – Gabe, a huge Clydesdale boarding with me – would have yet again jumped the gate to follow his pal.

By the same token, if his owner, Christina Dale wanted to take Gabe off the premises, my horse would go crazy and hurt himself.

I needed a companion horse and decided to foster a rescue.

My husband, though missing his horse, was not at all unhappy about our lower monthly horse bills. He told me in no uncertain terms that I could not rescue a horse and be liable for its expenses.

My great friend Kelli Williams put me in contact with Lori Harrington of Freedom Hill Horse Rescue, who was agreeable to my fostering a horse while the rescue continued to pay all his costs.

I told my husband that I had fulfilled his requirements (he was a bit shocked as he hadn’t expected this!) and that is how Noah came to us.

Guess what color Noah is? Yes, grey, just like CD!

He was a very thin and bony 17+ year old with scabs all over his body and legs from being picked on by four other horses in a tiny paddock with scarce food resources. Of the five horses in that minute space, four survived. The fifth died the morning the rescue arrived to take them away from their neglectful situation.

Noah is a very gentle Thoroughbred. When I began writing this book, I was trying to integrate him into my herd of two, as he was too gentle when they chased him. I put him in a paddock adjoining theirs, and all three horses munched on hay nets either side of the connecting gate.

As often as my son and I could manage, we heavily supervised an hour with the other two in the same field.
A Series of Eerie Coincidences

In the meantime Kelli had introduced me to Lyndi Caruso, a horse person and purveyor of essential oils for people and animals. A couple of weeks afterwards, I wrote to Lyndi apologizing for my late response to a message she’d sent me.

My excuse was that I’d been dealing with the arrival of a rescue horse.

She asked me about him as she was in touch with Kevin Murphy, a former Special Forces veteran setting up a facility for equine therapy for veterans with PTSD. She thought his farm might be a good fit for Noah when he was ready for adoption.

I contacted Kevin, who expressed an immediate interest in meeting Noah.

I passed his information onto Lori Harrington of the rescue, as I wanted her to know about a possible future home for Noah. Lori was excited and wanted to meet this man (who has PTSD himself) since the rescue had been thinking of setting up an equine therapy program of their own.

Doesn’t God work in marvelous ways?

I ‘just happened’ to have read about how horses can help heal PTSD, and ‘just happened’ to talk to a lady who ‘just happened’ to be working with a man who wants to run an equine therapy program for veterans with PTSD. He also ‘happened’ to be interested in meeting Noah with a view to possible adoption into his program… And the lady who runs the rescue which saved Noah ‘just happened’ to want to run a similar program locally….

The Outcome

My brain was reeling with all these ‘coincidences’ as I worked on the outline for this next book in the “Riding Out” series. (I know, I know, it started out as a trilogy. But readers have asked me to continue with the characters in it and it didn’t take much prodding for me to comply.)

So you’ll not be surprised to find a rescue horse in this book. His name is Isaac: I gave him an Old Testament name in Noah’s honor.

Kevin has been to see Noah and really likes him. He doesn’t mind if Noah can’t be ridden and has started the adoption process. I shall be sorry to see such a sweet horse leave, but am very happy about where he will be going next and confident he will do an excellent job of healing PTSD sufferers.

By the time I finish this book we’ll be further along in his story, but meanwhile I hope you enjoy what transpires in these pages of fiction.

Hilary Walker

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UPDATE: Noah was adopted by Kevin and is happily turned out with one other horse, which he gets on with famously. At last, a good home with an equine buddy who doesn’t pick on him.
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Chapter One: New Year’s Eve
Saturday, 31st December

The headlights on Father Michael’s battered blue sedan were struggling to pierce the 7 p.m. darkness of the deserted road leading to Jack Harper’s farm.

Jack and Laura, newly returned from their mini-honeymoon in Boston, had kindly invited the priest to their New Year’s Eve dinner and festivities.

Snow was beginning to flurry and he hoped he wouldn’t have to contend with bad weather on the way home. The old Toyota Corolla had 133,000 miles on it and he prayed constantly that it would keep going a lot longer. The front light bulbs needed replacing and the tires were dangerously thin.

*It’s all in God’s hands*, he reminded himself.

The electronic gates opened and he made his way to the rearing horse fountain at the top of the drive. The elegant ornament was silent for the duration of winter, but its lights lent a surreal quality to the whirling snowflakes and formed a pleasant foreground to the Harper’s ranch style house.

Every window was lit and the priest could see figures moving from room to room, laughing and talking, glasses in hand. The sight cheered him enormously and he determined to put the troublesome thoughts - which had plagued him all the way over - on the back burner for the next few hours.

He pulled a bottle of champagne off the passenger seat and exited the vehicle. Before he reached the top step to the front porch, Jack opened the front door and two dogs careened out past him.

Father Michael grinned broadly and shook the horse trainer’s hand. “Hello, Jack!”

“Good evening, Father! Good to see you again!” Jack’s grip was strong and welcoming.

“Likewise!” The priest bent down to stroke the Golden Retriever and the black Labrador mix, both vying for his attention. “Hey, there, Katie! Hi, 'Flex!’ Their long tails beat against his legs, depositing hairs on his black soutane.

Jack’s petite new wife, Laura, appeared in the doorway. “Great, you made it! Now our group is complete. Let me help you in.” She took the clergyman’s arm and escorted him into the house.

Entering the bright kitchen Father found it easy to put morbid thoughts behind him and handed the large bottle to his hostess.

“What superb taste, Father! Look, Jack, this is the real deal!”

“Nothing but the best for my favorite couple,” their guest replied.

Joe came in with a big grin. “Hi, Father!”
The boy had his father’s firm handshake and the pastor noted how much the eighteen year old had filled out since they last saw each other. It was a good sign that family life was helping the blond youngster keep his ulcerative colitis under control, with the assistance of his father who suffered from the same disease.

Yes, this newly formed family unit was mutually beneficial.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

“You seriously want to see them again?” Jack quipped. “Come on!”

The priest was led into the sitting room where a log fire crackled in the brick hearth, above which hung a streamer wishing everyone a “HAPPY NEW YEAR!” in silver and gold letters. He recognized Laura’s lanky brother Rob and his shorter wife Susan, who both rose to greet him from their leather armchairs by the fireside.

Only last summer Rob had approached Jack about allowing Joe’s difficult gelding Duke to spend a month with the horse trainer.

A lot had happened since.

Jack would have refused to help if the teenager hadn’t been suffering from ulcerative colitis. He found horse owners impossible at the best of times, but teenagers? No way! Whiny, self-absorbed know-it-alls. However, Joe’s condition - diagnosed at the same age as Jack when he discovered he had it - was the trigger for the trainer to take on the horse and help the gelding’s painfully thin owner deal with his infirmity.

Then Jack had met Laura, Joe’s adoptive mother…

The priest shook hands with Joe’s uncle. “Hi, Rob, good to see you again. Hello, Susan.”

“Are we only ever going to see you when the Harpers have a party at their home?” Rob said. The pastor’s last visit to the farm had been for the wedding reception.

“Sure. That's all they ever do here!” He winked at the new husband.

Jack said, “You got that right, Father! Married life is one big party.”

Rob put a hand on his taller in-law’s shoulder. “Boy, have you got a lot to learn, baby brother! You’re married to my sister, don’t forget!”

“You don’t bring out the best in her, unlike me,” Jack retorted. “Father, let me reintroduce you to some more uplifting people.”

The pastor was led over to Jack’s new parents-in-law. He had only met them once before, at the Harpers’ wedding, and was grateful to his host for tactfully reminding him of their names.

“You remember Mrs. Brady, Laura’s mother,” Jack said, steering Father towards a short, stout and black-haired older lady, who reached out her hand to him from her position on the sofa facing the hearth.

“Oh, no, Fazzer, not missus. Call me Agneta,” the German lady responded. “I'm so happy to see you again after zat beautiful wedding ceremony at Christmas!”
Father Michael wanted to joke about how happy he was that her daughter and son-in-law were still together after their honeymoon, but refrained: the comment might not be well-received. “It’s wonderful that you could stay over New Year, Agneta,” he said instead.

Her face clouded over. “Yes, but sadly we must all leave in two days.”

“Sorry to hear that. You will be very much missed.”

“Sank you, Father,” she replied with a smile and a nod.

“We’ve really enjoyed having you here,” Jack echoed. He turned to Agneta’s husband. “You remember my father-in-law, Gerald Brady.”

“Don’t get up, Mr. Brady.” Father bent down and extended his hand to the tall man sitting next to his wife, holding a cane between his knees. “How are you doing?”

Laura’s father was recovering from a bad leg break in several places, and it had been touch and go as to whether he would make the trip over for his daughter’s wedding.

On the day itself, his wife and son had tried to prevent him from leading Laura up the aisle. As the organ struck up the entrance music, he had pulled the bride’s arm away from her brother Rob with grim determination. Father Michael had watched the proud parent hobble up between the pews with her, supported by the cane in his free hand.

The invalid now smiled up at the priest. “I’m all the better for having you present to bless our entry into the New Year, Father.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brady!” He turned to Jack. “Why don’t you ever say nice things like that to me?”

“Because coming from me you’d know they weren’t sincere, Father. And telling a lie is a sin, as we all know.”

“Love thy neighbor, Jack!”

“Still working on that one, Father. Now stop preaching and say ‘hello’ to my father.” As they walked over he whispered into the holy man’s ear, “His name is Joseph Harper, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Father Michael rolled his eyes. “Thank you, Jack. I think I’ve been around your father enough times to remember his name.”

Mr. Harper was standing with Laura deep in a conversation which they terminated when Jack and Father Michael approached.

“You can stop telling my wife what a wonderful man I am, now, Dad.”

“Oh, son, how you’d love that to be what I was saying!”

Jack looked at Laura. “So what were you talking about?”

His wife shook the black shoulder length curls she’d inherited from her mother and looked up at him, with her head tilted to one side and an expression that gave nothing away.

Father Michael smiled to himself. He could see that Jack was still smitten by those deep blue eyes. He shook hands with Jack’s lofty and very thin English parent.
“Good to see you again, Father,” Mr. Harper replied.  

“And it’s good to meet a proper Catholic again,” Father Michael said and pointed to Jack. “As opposed to this work-in-progress.”

The new groom put an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “As long as I’m progressing, you should be happy.”

“The operative word there, Jack, is ‘work.’”

Jack tried to look hurt while Laura and her father-in-law laughed.

Father changed the subject. “So, you two, now you’ve been on your mini-honeymoon, I understand you’ll be going on a maxi-honeymoon some time?”

“As soon as my busy season is over,” Laura said. She explained that her new accounting job in Annapolis was going to involve long hours during the week, plus weekends, until the middle of April. Jack kissed the top of her head - she only reached to his shoulders - and scowled.

“Are you making faces by any chance?” she inquired.

Father Michael grinned. She wasn’t going to let Jack get away with anything.

The idea was to try and stay awake until midnight so they sat down to a very late dinner, having munch ed on healthy snacks throughout the evening.

When Jack announced before the meal that he was going to do a final check on the horses, Father Michael expressed an interest in coming with him to the barn.

“Uh-oh! I feel a sermon coming on!”

“Would you believe that I would simply like to see the horses - and get a spot of exercise?”

“No,” Jack said. He led his guest out onto the porch and past the parked vehicles to the barn.

“You know, if you want some exercise, you’re always welcome to come and ride a horse. I remember Joe told me you used to be into horses.”

“I was. Then my horse died, and my life abruptly changed direction. There wasn’t room for horses in it after that.”

“What happened?”

Father told his story. (See Riding Out the Turbulence for the full version.)

A hard-bitten New York financier, he’d been visiting his family for Thanksgiving when his beloved horse Double Cream died on their farm. God had used his grief and a series of other incidents to change the secular man’s focus from saving money to saving souls.

“Wow!” Jack said, “I’d never have guessed that you had such a worldly background.”

“I can assure you that underneath this garb beats the heart of a normal guy.”

Jack laughed. “Hardly!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” the priest said with a benign smile.
Jack was more serious now. “Isn’t it amazing how a single event can change our lives?”

“Or a single person.”

“Or two people,” said the new father and husband. “Now make yourself useful!” He gave the priest a grooming apron to shield his soutane so he could toss hay to the horses, while Jack picked out stalls and topped up water buckets.

There were fourteen equines in at present: two belonged to Jack, one was Joe’s and the others were here for training.

Dinner was sumptuous. Jack and Laura had carefully prepared a meal that father and son could safely eat, with the addition of other foods to accommodate everyone’s tastes.

Father was making his one glass of red wine last, as he knew there’d be champagne to toast in the New Year at midnight - if they all made it till then.

“Jack,” he suddenly said, “why doesn’t this farm have a name? Or does it have one that I’m not aware of?”

“I’ve often wondered about that,” said Mr. Harper senior. “It’s almost as if you’re here temporarily and don’t feel the need to name the place.”

Jack looked taken aback. “I can’t say I’ve ever given it any thought. I have no problem with the farm having a name.”

“It would make sense for your business,” Rob said.

“I’m open to suggestions.”


“For Jack and Joe?” his father guessed.

“Yeah! I think it’s a great idea. Don’t you?”

“But it doesn’t include your mother’s name, son.”

“Oh, shoot! Sorry Mom!”

“That’s O.K. Joe.” She placed a hand on her son’s arm. “I know my place. What about the Harper Farm?”

“Not bad,” her husband replied, “but it does sound rather ordinary. However, I do like the idea of having our last name in it. It brings the three of us together.”


“Or Harper’s Horse Training?” said Uncle Rob.

Jack thought a moment. “I like both those names, but they still make it too much about me, and not my family.”

While the others were throwing out possible names, Father Michael pondered on Jack’s words that using their last name: ‘brings the three of us together.’ This farm was where Jack had first
met Joe and formed a bond with him before realizing the boy was his actual son. It was also the place where he’d had the life-altering meeting with Joe’s adoptive mother.

Finally he spoke. “I have a suggestion.”

Jack leaned his elbows at the table. “O.K. let’s have it.”

“How about ‘Harpers’ Reunion’?”

Laura clapped her hands. “That’s brilliant, Father! This is where Jack Harper was reunited with his son, Joe.”

“And became united with Joe’s mother,” Jack added. “I agree. That is a brilliant suggestion. What do you think, Joe?”

“Well, if you guys won’t go with J & J & L, then I guess it’ll have to be Harpers’ Reunion.” But it was obvious the teenager approved of the name.

“Just to be clear,” Father Michael stated, “The ‘Harpers’ part of the name has to be in the plural with the apostrophe on the outside.”

“Agreed,” Jack concurred. “Otherwise we’re back to its being about me again.”

“And we don’t want that,” the priest said.

Everyone round the table laughed. “Here! Here!”

With that settled, the conversation turned to the couple’s short trip to Boston after the wedding, and their plans for the real honeymoon. The three parents had clubbed together to pay for them to go to the Caribbean in April. They would be staying at Caneel Bay on St. John’s Island, in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

As midnight struck, the family and friends were still awake enough to raise their glasses of champagne and wish each other a Happy New Year.

Father Michael said, “Before you down all your bubbly, I’d like to propose another toast. Please raise your glasses to Mr. and Mrs. Harper and - “ with a nod to their son, “ - to Joe Harper.” He raised his flute. “And to Harpers’ Reunion!”

“With the apostrophe outside the ‘s’ so it’s not all about Dad,” Joe added.

The raucous laughter made Jack complain, “I’m never going to hear the end of that, am I?”
Chapter Two: Humble Abode

Sunday, 1st January

Thankfully the snow was still flurrying around half-heartedly when Father Michael got in his car to drive home. But as the cheerful lights from the Harper house receded in his rear view mirror, so did his own cheerfulness.

The morbid thoughts he’d left out in the cold during the festivities now came creeping back as he remembered the depressing visit from his brother-in-law, Simon, on New Year’s Eve afternoon.

Simon was pulling his hair out and for good reason. Justin, his own brother-in-law, was staying with his family and the man’s PTSD symptoms were having a detrimental effect on everyone.

For two years Justin had been going to talk therapy. But there’d been no actual talking on his part: he consistently refused to open up about his experiences and his feelings about them. The sessions were a waste of time and money and his therapist had given up on him, just as his wife had.

The only place left to go was his sister’s house.

Simon and his wife Angela were afraid to leave him alone in case he harmed himself. They’d read the alarming statistics on veteran suicide and understood the dangers.

And then there was the concern about the impact of the uncle’s behavior on their teenage daughter, Alice.

Father Michael was out of his depth, but gave Simon all the encouragement he could. “Pray to St. Jude and don’t despair. Something will turn up, I promise.” With a hopeful smile he’d asked the distraught man, “Do you think Justin would come and see me?”

“Are you kidding? He’d laugh at the idea and probably say something like ‘Where was God when the bomb dropped on those civilians? Where was He when I led my men to their deaths?’”

“Put like that, I can understand that he wouldn’t want to talk to a man of the cloth.”

“Believe me, Father, I wish it were as simple as your having a chat with him.”

It was a tough situation. What could he do to help these unhappy people?

Thinking of unhappy people, the priest’s focus changed to his father. Mr. Shepherd senior was in a nursing home after a stroke last year paralyzed his left side and brought on dementia. Father Michael’s sister Stella and her husband Daniel were visiting their lonely mother for the year end celebrations in Charlottesville, Virginia and all three would have been to visit his father.

But would the invalid recognize them?

The priest was now parking outside his ‘very small apartment with no yard to speak of,’ as he’d described it to Jack. The horseman had been trying to get the pastor to adopt a dog from the local animal shelter on behalf of Robert, a boy whom the trainer was helping overcome confidence issues, who loved dogs but whose father was allergic to their hair.
Father Michael hadn’t been lying when he told Jack how small his place was. It was built into the administrative buildings of Our Lady of Sorrows Church, with no fence around the property to stop a canine from wandering off.

So he’d adopted the dog for Robert and continued to pay its bills while keeping it at Jack’s farm. ’Flex was the priest’s dog in name only. Robert adored the animal and spent as much time as he could over at the Harpers’ place playing with and training it.

The clergyman walked into his cramped quarters. There were plans for building a priest’s house on the land across the road, but the funds were always needed more urgently elsewhere. He didn’t mind - the place was perfect for him.

He dipped his finger into the holy water fount just inside his front door and made the Sign of the Cross. After dressing for bed he knelt to say his prayers before retiring for the night.

Lying in comfort under his duvet, he found himself still fretting over Simon’s brother-in-law problem.

Then he recalled Our Lord’s words in Matthew 6:27: “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” And again where He says, in Matthew 6:24: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

He raised his eyes heavenward and said, “To paraphrase Pope St. John XXIII: “They’re your parishioners, Lord. I’m going to sleep.”
Chapter Three: In the Confessional
Monday, January 30th

Knowing how hard it is for even the most faithful Catholics to confess their sins, Father Michael made himself available for Reconciliation (the modern word for Confession) every weekday morning after the 8 a.m. Mass.

He provided additional opportunities after Mass at 7 p.m. on Wednesdays during mid-week Adoration and remained in the Confessional until 11 p.m.

This Monday morning he was in the little room listening to a married parishioner. Penitents had the option of kneeling behind a screen or sitting opposite him if they preferred a more conversational approach. Being a traditionalist, this older lady was kneeling hidden from view.

Father Michael patiently waited for a pause in the litany of her husband’s defects.

When no such gap was forthcoming, he interrupted her gently with, “Mrs. Fletcher, might I remind you that you are here to confess your sins and failings, and not those of your spouse?”

“Oh, I am sorry Father. It’s that you’re the only one I can talk to about him.”

Well aware that she complained about her husband to everyone in the parish, the priest was tempted to tell this lady she had just committed another sin by lying, but let it pass. There was only so much admonishment she could take in one sitting.

He absolved her a few minutes later, after she got back on track and remembered her own offenses, and the next penitent walked in.

It was Jack, whom he hadn’t seen in the confessional since his wedding.

The horse trainer walked past the kneeler and took the padded chair opposite Father Michael, looking downcast.

“Hello, Jack!” The priest made a Sign of the Cross and waited for the horseman to begin.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is about a month since my last confession.”

Father Michael nodded encouragingly.

“And I’m really frustrated!”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I love Laura so much, and I thought that being married to her would mean spending more time together. But she never has any time for me!”

Jack sounded a lot like the older lady who had just left.

“I know she’s just started a new job, Father, and the hours are crazy because it’s the busy season and she has no choice. She gave up her promotion to partner in Richmond to be with me here. So I have no reason to complain.”
“And yet you do complain?”

Jack nodded miserably. “Pretty much every day, Father. And then I feel rotten for whining. She has to prove herself to her new employer all day at work, and then at home she has to contend with my moaning that she’s not fulfilling my expectations.” Jack looked up. “I’m being really hard on her. It’s not fair.”

“Have you told her that?”

Jack looked taken aback. “No, I haven’t.” The thought had clearly not occurred to him.

Father Michael said gently, “One of the keys to a successful marriage is being able to apologize to one’s spouse. Marriage can easily turn into a sparring match, a clash of egos and a sense of ‘I’m doing more for you than you are for me.’

“But a Christian marriage is based on each spouse doing whatever possible to make the other’s life more comfortable. Laura understands why you’re frustrated - with your excellent help.” He gave Jack a wry smile. “And you know you’re adding to her frustration. So tell her you’re sorry for being so demanding and see if you can’t both figure out a way to set aside a special time each week for each other. A meal or something, just the two of you.”

Jack nodded slowly, taking in this new thought. “It would be something to look forward to until this craziness is over.”

“Yes, and a means of letting her know that you do love her and have her interests at heart, not only yours.”

Jack was looking at his hands and playing uncomfortably with his wedding ring, so Father asked, “Was there anything else?”

“Um, yes. Joe has advanced more in dressage than I can help him with, so he and I chose a new instructor for him.”

“I don’t see anything wrong in that. Wasn’t Laura involved in the decision, too?”

“Well, the thing is, no. If I had involved her it would have saved me from what is becoming a bit of a tricky situation.”

His confessor waited patiently.

“You see, the best candidate turned out to be a rather attractive young lady.”

“Attractive to whom?”

“Well, I won’t deny that she’s easy on the eyes, but I’m not interested in her, if that’s what you mean.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s taken me rather a long time to get there, but I’ve now realized she’s being very flirtatious with me.” Jack was looking red-faced.

“And what with Laura being gone so much, your ego is being stroked by it?”

“How did you know?”
“This isn’t my first time in this seat, Jack.” The priest’s words were measured. “What do you plan to do about it?”

“I don’t know. Joe is very happy with his lessons and improving fast.”

“And you’re perfectly happy to continue with things as they are? Has Laura met this lady?”

Jack said uncomfortably, “Father, you know she hasn’t!”

“Then I think you’re walking into dangerous territory, my son. You need to find another, less attractive instructor. There must be other good ones out there.”

Jack looked miserable. “I hate firing people, Father!”

“The alternative is hurting Laura, which is a thousand times worse.” He paused. “Anything else?”

Jack gave a hollow laugh. “Isn’t that enough?”

Father smiled. “For your penance, I want you to recite a decade of the Rosary and pray for the strength to remove this temptation.” He then absolved a chagrined Jack. “I’ll also pray for you, Jack. This is a tough one.”

The rangy trainer rose from his seat and shook the priest’s hand. “Thank you, Father. I need all the prayers I can get.”

Jack left the door open and the parish priest peeked round to see how many were still waiting in line for confession. This gave him a good idea of how much time he could spend talking to each person.

Some people were in hurry to get their sins off their chest. Others needed spiritual guidance which required more time. If the line outside was long, he’d ask the parishioner to make an appointment to see him, although he preferred dealing with issues immediately, while the person had the courage to discuss them. Anyone with a particularly difficult or embarrassing problem wants help now, not later.

Today there were only two more waiting outside.

The next person to enter was Simon Weinstock, the man whose situation was so troubling Father Michael. They had not spoken since the night of Jack’s New Year’s Eve party and the priest felt a twinge of guilt. This month had been busy and he had done nothing beyond including the Weinstock family in his daily prayers.

He sent up a quick request to the Holy Spirit as Simon walked in: Remember I asked You for guidance at the end of the year? Well, now would be an excellent time for you to come through!

He gave his best smile to the haggard man gingerly taking the seat across from him. “Hello, Simon. You look tired.”

Was that a resentful look?

Simon took a deep breath, probably to rein in his emotions, while Father Michael made the Sign of the Cross and prayed for him to make a good confession. Then he said: “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is six weeks since my last confession.”
The stocky man was wringing his hands. His jaw was working and he was grinding his teeth - which he may not even have been aware of.

Father Michael waited for Simon to continue.

“I’ve lost my temper with Justin many times these past few weeks. I snap at my wife and avoid family activities. I come home late after work, to get out of being with Justin and having to deal with Angela’s frustration over having him at home in a mood all day. I tend to think ‘he’s her brother, not mine’ and I know that’s wrong. She’s my wife, so he’s my family, too.

“I don’t do enough - or anything - to support her or Alice emotionally. And I certainly don’t feel charitable enough towards Justin to even want to support him anymore. I used to, Father, but he’s impossible to deal with!” Simon stared listlessly at the red and blue pattern on the floor rug.

Father Michael tried to sound soothing. “First of all Simon, it’s good that you’re aware of what’s going on. That’s the first step to doing something about it. The second is to pray.”

Simon rolled his eyes.

“I take it you don’t believe in the power of prayer?”

Simon looked up, embarrassed. “I didn’t say that, Father!”

“But your face told me. Sometimes we ask God to change the other person and get discouraged when He doesn’t. But that’s the wrong way round. We need to ask God to change us. And this is an instance where such prayers would be most beneficial.

“For your penance, I’d like you to ask God to change your heart so that you can feel empathy for Justin and look for ways to help him.”

Simon’s expression clearly said ‘you’re kidding, right?’

The priest smiled. “I know it seems impossible, but that’s exactly why you have to pray hard about it. Justin is going through much worse than anything you’re suffering. He needs your compassion, Simon.”

The penitent looked defeated. “O.K. Father, I’ll do that. But how about you come to dinner tomorrow night, so you can observe life with Justin and maybe get some ideas of how else we can help him?”

“I’d be happy to. It would be good for me to experience a little of what you’re enduring.”

“Thank you!”

“For the second part of your penance I’d like you to go to Holy Hour on Wednesday evening.”

He then absolved Simon, who exited the confessional leaving Father Michael to wonder what awaited him at dinner the following evening.
Chapter Four: Dinner and a Dare
Tuesday, January 31st

With trepidation Father Michael rang the doorbell of the Weinstock residence at 6 p.m. the next day. The family lived in a quiet tree-lined road some twenty minutes away from Our Lady of Sorrows.

He had no idea what to expect, but for sure it wouldn’t be fun.

Simon opened the door. Although his face was drawn he looked genuinely pleased to see the priest. “Come on in, Father!”

He led his pastor through a short entrance hall, which opened onto a large kitchen and a cozy sitting area beyond. The anxiety was palpable as soon as he entered and the only warmth came from the burning flames in the brick fireplace.

“Hello, Father.” Hard at work in the kitchen, Angela wiped a hand on her red-checkered apron to shake his. The normally robust lady looked tired. After releasing Father’s hand she placed a stray strand of red hair behind her ear. “You’ll excuse me if I return to my stove?”

He nodded with a smile and Simon said, “You know my daughter Alice.”

Busy draining vegetables in a colander over the sink, she greeted him with a desultory “Hi, Father,” before returning to her duties.

Sitting alone in an armchair by the fire, with his back to everyone, was a man of medium height but obviously strong build, whom the womenfolk were avoiding. When he turned his head, Father noted how the severe military cut of ginger hair gave his already pinched face an extra sharp appearance.

A man not to be messed with!

“This is my brother-in-law, Justin Chambers. Justin, this is - “

“The priest who’s come to check me out.” He rose slowly and offered his hand with a bored expression. “I would say I’m pleased to meet you, but I understand Catholics don’t care for lies, so I won’t say it.”

Aware of Simon’s acute embarrassment, Father Michael nodded with a bland smile. “You’re right, we don’t. I appreciate your candor.”

“I doubt it. But kudos for managing to say it.” Justin turned to Simon. “Was that the right thing to say?” He sneered, daring his brother-in-law to react.

Oh boy! Simon has a hard job on his hands! At the end of this evening I can go home. But this is his home - he can’t escape and neither can his wife and daughter.

Holy Spirit, please help me to see the face of Christ in this man!

“Can I get you a drink, Father?” Simon asked, ignoring Justin’s barb. “Beer or wine?”

“A glass of red wine would go down well, if you have it.”
He was conscious of Justin watching him with suspicion: he’d have to be careful of what he said and did throughout the whole evening.

“Thanks for not asking, Simon. I’ll take a large neat whisky.” The veteran still had a half-full glass in his hand and swiftly downed it before giving it to his brother-in-law.

“Justin, I think you’d better have some soda with that.”

“Simon, I think you’d better not put soda with that,” Justin mimicked.

Angela and Alice glanced nervously towards the sitting area.

_Holy Spirit, help me diffuse this situation!_

Simon took the glass from his rude relative and walked across the room to the wet bar with measured steps, giving him time to take deep breaths and prevent himself from exploding.

Poor man! No wonder he and his family looked so frazzled!

Simon poured the drinks and carried them on a tray to the coffee table in front of the fireplace.

Justin snatched his whisky glass before Simon could hand it to him, and as the priest was being given his red wine, asked, “So what’s your assessment of me so far, Father?”

“I see a man who likes to get a reaction and doesn’t care if it’s a negative one.”

Justin threw his head back and laughed. Then he said, “Are you reacting negatively to me, then?”

“Do you care how I react?” parried the priest.

“Is that a charitable response from a man of God?”

“It’s more charitable than your behavior deserves.”

The military man grinned. “You’re going to be a lot more fun than I expected.” He took a long draft of his whisky while eying the holy man.

“I’m glad you think so.” Father Michael smiled wryly and took a shorter sip of his wine. He walked over to the women in the kitchen. “Can I do anything to help?” he asked.

“Ask my husband for a refill, please!” Angela held out her empty glass with a small smile.

“With pleasure.” He returned to the sitting area.

Simon took the glass from him. “Sorry, Ange, I’ll get that right away.”

The pastor sat in the armchair opposite Justin and sipped on his wine, staring into the flames and asking God to help him talk to this deeply unhappy man.

“So what’s my brother-in-law been telling you about me, then?”

The priest’s voice was neutral. “What makes you think he’s said anything about you?”

“Oh come on! I know that’s why you’re here!”

“You do know that Simon is related to my sister by marriage?”
“Sure I do.”

“Then is it so strange for me to visit a relative of mine who also happens to be a parishioner?”

Justin’s narrowed his eyes. “Not strange, but suspicious.”

Angela called from the kitchen that dinner was ready.

“Saved by the bell, pastor,” Justin said.

The cleric’s response was a weak smile.

**Dear God, don’t let me be goaded into saying anything I regret!**

Angela placed Father Michael at the head of the table, opposite her husband, with herself on Simon’s right and Alice next to her. Justin sat across from them, where he could scowl at his family in isolation. He grinned as he sat down, looking around at their faces and enjoying their discomfort.

The tension was unbearable. Everyone except Justin sat on the edge of their chair, waiting for him to erupt.

Father was surprised to note that he, too, was holding his breath and sent up another prayer. **Dear Lord, this family needs help! How can I give it?**

Angela gave a false laugh to break the silence. “O.K. everyone, please help yourselves.”

They each had a plate in front of them and the array of food on the tablecloth was impressive. Roast pork and apple sauce, roast and mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, broccoli and cauliflower. Angela had placed several salt and pepper shakers within easy reach of everyone and the priest guessed this was to avoid having to ask Justin to pass them to his family.

Simon carried a bottle of pinot grigio over to his guest.

“Just half a glass, please.”

“Father’s Catholic, Simon,” Justin mocked. “He only drinks red wine. Didn’t you know that?”

Both men ignored the comment. Simon walked round to his wife and poured her a full glass.

Alice was too young to drink alcohol, so her father lifted the bottle with eyebrows raised towards his son-in-law. “Justin?”

“I’d prefer more whisky, but if that’s all you have available, I’ll go for it.”

The wine poured, Simon sat down. “Father, would you please say grace?” He took his wife’s hand and looked over at Justin, who had already picked up his knife and fork to begin eating.

The annoyed veteran put them down again with a theatrical sigh and rolled eyes. “This again!” He turned to their guest with a sneer, “Want to take my hand, Father?”

“I sure do!” Father Michael took the offered hand firmly in his. “Let us bow down our heads for the blessing.

“Bless us, Father, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Amen.”
Justin snatched his hand away and picked up his eating utensils. As he hacked away at his food, Angela turned to her daughter.

“How was school today, darling?”

The seventeen year old looked nervously at her uncle before saying anything and it pained their pastor to see how afraid she was of him.

Her mother attempted to help her. “Did you get your revision done for tomorrow’s English test?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got to do some cramming tonight.”

“Well, make sure you get enough sleep tonight, or you won’t do your best.”

“Mom, I’m so stressed out about it I’m not going to sleep anyway.”

“Stressed? Stressed about what?” Uncle Justin loudly snorted across the table.

“Don’t start, Justin,” Angela said.

“I’m not talking to you, I’m talking to Alice. So what are you so stressed about?” Justin put on a whiny voice.

“You don’t have to answer that, darling. Uncle Justin doesn’t understand the strain you’re under.”

“You people don’t know what stress is!” her brother roared.

“Justin, please!” Simon begged.

“Don’t you ‘please’ me! You people are impossible. I don’t have to sit and listen to this!” He shoved back his chair and it fell over with the force. “Forgive me, Father, as you Catholics would say.” He stormed out of the room and they heard the front door slam.

Despite the shock of the man’s sudden departure, Father Michael could feel the relief around the table. As much as he would have liked to stay and enjoy his meal without the disruption of Justin’s temper, he was called to see Christ in everyone and bring souls to God.

Taking a quick sip of his wine he said, “I’ll go out to him.”

“Are you sure that’s wise, Father? I wouldn’t put it past Justin to be physically violent.”

“I’ll take my chances.” He took his glass of wine and picked up Justin’s to take out to him.

Simon said, “That may not be a good idea, Father. He’s already had a lot to drink. Plus he could use his glass as a weapon if he so decided.”

The priest brought the two glasses back to the table. “Good point. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Good luck, Father!” Angela’s voice was anxious. “Please come back in one piece.”

He gave her a grin. “Oh, I will. It’s the other guy you should worry about!”

As he walked through the front door he wasn’t sure whether Justin would still be on the premises. He might have gone for a walk to cool down. But he was sitting in a swing chair on the front deck with a vacant look in his eyes.
“That you, Father?” he asked without looking round.

“Yes. Mind if I sit next to you?”

“I do, very much, but that’s not going to stop you, is it?”

“No.” The cleric sat on the other end of the long chair, keeping a physical distance between them.

“Afraid to sit too near me?” Justin goaded.

“No. Want me to come closer?”

“The hell I do! That’s plenty close enough!” Justin used his feet to push the swing into motion, presumably to upset the priest.

Instead Father Michael joined in. He thrust the swing backwards with more force but in the same rhythm. For a while they simply rocked to and fro with increasing speed and strength until the seat hit the front wall of the house, scraping the cedar siding.

The two men looked at each other fleetingly, both aware that they were in trouble with the owners whose property they’d damaged. It wasn’t much, but it was a brief moment of unity and they stopped swinging.

Justin broke the silence. “I’ll tell Simon it was your fault.”

“Of course you will. I’d expect no less from you.”

“You don’t think much of me, do you, Father?”

The priest shook his head slowly. “I don’t think much of your behavior, that’s for sure. But I’m not in a position to judge you as a person.”

“Maybe not, but you’re judging me just the same. They all are.” He waved towards the house.

“Have you ever stopped to consider how miserable you’re making them feel?”

“Have they ever stopped to consider how miserable I feel?”

“You never let up telling them.”

“Yet they still don’t get it.”

“For them to ‘get’ it they have to want to. And your behavior is not making them want to.”

“I know. They want me gone.” Justin stared ahead of him.

“Wouldn’t you want you gone, if you were in their shoes?”

The veteran looked sharply at Father Michael. “Aren’t you supposed to be making me feel better, instead of pointing out what a louse I am?”

“I actually don’t think you’re a louse. But I think you believe that.”

“Yeah, well if you knew the things I’ve done, you wouldn’t like yourself either.”

“So what kind of things have you done?” Father Michael tried not to sound too curious.
“You want me to tell you, so that you can reassure me that ‘it’s not so bad, really’.” He stared at his hands. “I did them because I had to - because somebody had to, and I was the one chosen to do them.

“And I know what you’re trying to do. You want me to feel better about myself so you can tick off the box and say you’ve done your job as a priest and get me into church using a bunch of religious platitudes. Stuff like ‘Jesus was with me even when I felt my loneliest’ and ‘He loves you more than you know,’ blah, blah, blah.

“Well, it’s not going to work. You don’t understand what I’ve been through - you can’t understand, because you weren’t there - so let’s not go through this charade!”

The bitter veteran’s voice rose with each word and he was shouting at the top of his lungs by the end of this speech.

_Holy Mother of God, he really needs help!_

Father Michael had learned a long time ago that the best thing when faced with an angry person was not do anything to antagonize them further. He leaned forwards, quietly listening, palms resting on his knees, praying mightily for this man but careful not to arrange his hands into a prayerful pose in case that angered him even more. Experience had taught him that the fastest way to infuriate non-believers is to appear to be praying for them. They view it as a form of condescension.

When his companion had finished his rant, Father Michael said in a deliberately calm voice, “Am I at least right in saying that anger is your best friend now?”

“It’s either that or numbness. And I prefer anger.”

“I would, too. It’s more human to be angry than to be numb.”

Justin nodded faintly and yawned. Then he covered his face with his hands to shut out the priest.

Father Michael felt a strong urge to put his arm around Justin’s shoulders in the fatherly manner which had helped Jack on many occasions. But he wasn’t dealing with Jack and sympathy would probably annoy this veteran, who wanted empathy but couldn’t find it among those who’d not experienced his traumas.

He continued to pray silently, giving Justin time to himself. Then he said, “Forgive my mentioning it, but you look as if you haven’t slept for a long time.”

“Yer think?” Justin jerked his head up. “If you saw what I see in my dreams you wouldn’t want to sleep!”

The pastor needed to find a better topic. On impulse he asked, “Are you a betting man?”

“Excuse me? Are you accusing me of gambling now?’

“Good heavens, no! But I would like to propose a wager.”

Justin’s face twisted into a distorted grin. “Oh, _would_ you?”

Father nodded.
“I’m listening.” The veteran’s amused expression indicated ‘this is going to be good!’

_Holy Spirit, help me!_

“I want to wager that I can get you to believe in God by Easter.”

Justin burst out laughing. “You’re a real trip, Father! Don’t you ever give up?”

“That's not in my job description.”

“Just for the sake of argument, supposing I agree to your wager, what do I get out of it if I win?”

“Not so fast. First, if I win, you have to have to come to Sunday Mass at Easter.”

Justin made a face. “And if _I_ win?” he repeated.

“I promise to leave you in peace. No more evangelizing, no more trying to save your soul.”

The veteran’s face suddenly reddened and he balled his fists. “You call this existence _peace_? What kind of joke are you trying to pull? Your wager stinks!”

“This is a lose-lose situation for me! How does believing in your God help me? I believed in him when I left for Iraq - and where did _that_ get me?” Justin spat on the deck. “I’m not interested!”

Father Michael was lost for words and racked his brain for another way to save this man from perdition. “O.K.” he finally said, “how about this? I win if I can persuade you there is nothing God can’t forgive and that there is a point to all your suffering?”

Justin snorted. “I already know there’s a point to my ‘suffering’, as you put it. It’s to protect the innocent people back home. It’s to protect other countries from their enemies. Someone has to do it, and that’s people like me.”

“Doesn’t that make you feel good about yourself?”

This produced a derisive laugh. “Yeah, right! Not when the things I had to do are completely against the rules of society. Not when they make me a bad person in people’s eyes. I’m supposed to protect them, but without upsetting their precious principles!”

“That is grossly unfair,” Father Michael agreed, “and thoroughly ungrateful of them.”

The embattled man looked exhausted: this was a lot of talking for him on a painful subject.

The cleric shook his head and thought about the man’s words. “Justin, most people don’t know this, but when the Bible says ‘Thou shalt not kill’ the word used for ‘kill’ is ‘murder.’ We’re not allowed to murder in cold blood, but we _are_ allowed to kill in self-defense.”

Justin’s shoulders drooped and he didn’t bother to look at his companion. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Father, and that does put a different perspective on it. But it doesn’t exonerate me from blame for ‘collateral damage’ - the civilians killed ‘for the greater good’ and the men I’ve lost through my leadership decisions, who died under my command. Nothing lets me off the hook for that.”

Father wished so much that he could help Justin understand how much greater God’s capacity for forgiveness is than man’s incapacity to forgive himself! But he hadn’t done things which he found impossible to forgive himself for, as Justin had.
His voice was conciliatory. “I can only fiercely agree that you’re carrying a heavy burden.” He paused. “But even David and Moses had blood on their hands.”

The veteran gave a weary laugh. “You mean, my sins aren’t that big of a deal? That I’m not that special?” He put air quotations around the word ‘special.’

“That’s not - “

“I know, I know. I’m wallowing in self-pity and I need to snap out of it.”

Father was horrified. Did this man really think that’s what he meant? “No! What you’re dealing with doesn’t allow you to snap out of it!”

“So we’ve come full circle, Father, just like I always do. But thank you for a diverting conversation.”

“Hey, I’m not ready to give up yet! I’m determined to get your sorry rear end in my pew by Easter!”

“Good luck with that one.”

“Thank you, Justin, but I don’t need luck.”

“I know, I know.” He made air quotations again. “You’ve got ‘God on your side.’”

“He’s on your side, too, Justin.”

“Yeah, right. Good one, Father.”

Although this conversation hadn’t gone entirely the way the priest had hoped, at least a calmer Justin walked back into the dining room. He sat down to eat his cold dinner as if he’d never left and the priest did likewise. The atmosphere was considerably less tense and Alice’s parents chatted with her about this and that without any more interruption from her uncle.

Father Michael hoped that he had won the veteran’s respect, however begrudging, and wondered where to take it from here.

The man was hurting horriby and there must surely be some way to help him?
The following evening Father Michael sat in the confessional after the Wednesday 7 p.m. Mass. His first visitor was Jack, whom he’d been pleased to see in the pews but was surprised to see back in this little room so soon.

“Hello again, Jack!”

“Bless me Father, it is two days since my last confession.” He sat down and looked up at the pastor with a foolish look on his face, which Father Michael tried to ignore. It must be bad if the man was back in here after a mere 48 hours.

The horse trainer was wringing his hands. “There was an incident at the farm,” he said. “It’s got to do with Miss Maddie.”

“I’m guessing she is the instructor of whom you spoke last time?”

“Yeah,” Jack was inspecting his hands and once again twirling the wedding ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. He gave a deep sigh and looked up. “She came onto me at the barn.”

“Define ‘came onto.’”

“Do I have to?”

“Jack, that’s part of the process. You know that.”

“Well, it wasn’t anything major. It’s just that she came to the farm yesterday, which is not her regular teaching day. It was in the afternoon, so Joe as well as Laura weren’t there. In hindsight I realize she did it on purpose.”

Father Michael waited.

“She said she needed to talk to me about something and since it was a really cold day I suggested we go into the heated tack room. I wasn’t thinking straight. I opened the door for her to pass through in front of me and she - well, she brushed hard against me in a provocative way.”

“How did you react?”

“I was terrified! I coughed and said I needed to ask Luca to take care of something for me first and left her alone in there while I fetched him.” Luca was Jack’s farm manager and his right hand man. “I told him I was worried Miss Maddie was trying to seduce me and he said everyone had seen it coming. Except me, of course.”

“Oh, Jack! You really are the innocent sometimes! So what did you do then?”

“Luca offered to go in there without me and find out if she really did want something or if she was just trying to get me alone. I thanked him and told him to please warn me in future of any impending attacks on me by females on my property.”
“Except by your wife, I presume?”

“Don’t laugh, Father, this is embarrassing!”

“Sorry, Jack, but you already knew she was flirting with you. I can’t believe you didn’t predict this!”

“Well, I didn’t. I’m much better at reading horses than people, as you well know. But now I feel terrible! What do I tell Laura?”

“You tell her the truth. That you made a mistake in hiring Miss Maddie and you’re going to have to fire her because she’s coming onto you.”

“You seriously think Laura will accept that?”

“Your wife is a sensible lady who understands that your knowing more about horses than people is true. As long as you do fire Miss Maddie - and involve Laura in the hiring of the new instructor - I’m confident there’ll be no fallout.”

Jack looked relieved.

“But Jack, make sure the new instructor is far less attractive.”

The horse trainer grimaced. “That’s for sure!”

“Anything else?”

“Probably, but I can’t think of it right now. I feel so bad about the Maddie thing.”

“O.K. For your penance, I want you to spend time in front of the Blessed Sacrament this evening. Thank Our Lord for the great sacrifice He made on our behalf and ponder on how much we owe Him in gratitude. And thank Him in advance for such an understanding wife. Now say the Act of Contrition.”

Father absolved him of his sins and added, as the trainer was leaving, “You may think you’re only any good with horses, but you’re actually at your happiest when you’re helping people.”

Jack wrinkled his nose in distaste. “That had better not mean you have someone in mind for me to help. Have a good evening, Father.”

“Likewise, Jack.”

The line of people outside was long. Most parishioners couldn’t come to daily morning Mass and Confession afterwards, so this was their one opportunity for Reconciliation during the week. Evenings like this were tiring. He was confessor, counselor, comforter, advisor and consoler and had to handle the wrath of the many whom he exhorted to mend their ways.

When he’d absolved the last person just after 10 p.m. he felt a strong desire to contemplate the exposed Body of Christ.

It was an hour before he needed to return the Host to the tabernacle in the wall behind the altar, and he needed time to think about Justin’s situation and how to help the man.
Rising stiffly, he removed his stole, then switched off the light and walked out of the little room. He turned off the small white machine producing white noise on the floor outside the door, to prevent nosy penitents from hearing what was being confessed inside.

A handful of parishioners were still at Adoration.

At the back of the church he knelt on both knees and bowed his forehead to the ground in veneration. He stood up and spotted Jack sitting towards the front in his usual pew. Goodness, the man had been here a long time!

As the priest peered harder into the semi-darkness it looked - and sounded - as if Jack was fast asleep. Father was about to wake him up when Simon - who, the priest was glad to see, had remembered to come for his penance - approached the snoring man and tapped him on the shoulder.

A startled Jack woke up. The two men shook hands and an idea came to Father Michael, who smiled and studiously ignored Jack walking past him down the aisle and out of the church. The horseman was embarrassed enough already.

The parish priest pulled down the kneeler in his pew and contemplated the Holy Presence while mulling over his new thought.

*Thank you, Holy Spirit! I think you've just given me my answer!*

At 11 p.m. he removed the Blessed Sacrament from the Monstrance after saying three times, “O Sacrament Most Holy, O Sacrament Divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine.” He locked the Host in the tabernacle and bowed before walking the short distance to his apartment.

Pouring a strong coffee to keep himself awake for the next few hours, he embarked on extensive research on the internet.

By the time he went to bed he was grinning from ear to ear.

*Thank you, Lord!*
Chapter Six: Sunday Lunch & a Ride

Sunday, February 5th

Despite only a few hours’ sleep, he awoke full of enthusiasm for his new plan at the normal time of 5 a.m. to say morning prayers and prepare the sermon for 8 a.m. Mass.

Once confessions were over, he called Jack to arrange a meeting, and was greatly touched when Jack and Laura invited him to have lunch with them after the noon Sunday Mass. With the clock ticking on his wager, he really wished he could talk to Jack before then. But, he told himself, *It’s all in God’s hands – don’t try and rush anything.*

The unwanted delay also gave him time to put his thoughts in order.

Jack called back that evening to warn the priest that Joe wanted him to bring comfortable clothes to ride in.

He rummaged around in his closet for fitting attire. He’d long ago parted with his breeches and boots: as a priest when he would ever have need of them? But riding with Jack would be a good opportunity to bring up his special request. And he looked forward to getting on a horse again.

He found an old pair of corduroy pants with a soft inner seam and some sturdy hiking boots, which he hoped would be suitable footwear.

Having attended midday Mass, the Harpers were fine with a late lunch. The family was in good form when he arrived a little before 2 p.m. It was good to see ‘his’ dog, ‘Flex again, and when no one was looking, he passed a few pieces of meat to the black lab mix under the table.

There was none of the tension around the table that he’d experienced at the Weinstock house, despite Jack’s problems with his wife’s demanding work schedule. Had they figured out a way to deal with that?

His unspoken query was answered by Joe. “Father, can you believe it? My parents are still dating! You’d think that would have stopped when they got married!”

“Is that so?” the cleric replied with a grin and an eyebrow raised towards the newly-weds.

The couple looked slightly abashed and Laura told her son, “Why shouldn’t we still go on dates?”

“Because the point of dating is to get to know the person you want to marry. Once you’re married, there’s no need to date anymore, because you live together and that’s like being on a permanent date.”

Jack explained, “Right now your mom is working crazy hours and we don’t get to spend any time together unless we arrange a date. That’s what we’re doing: we’ve set aside Wednesday lunch times for the two of us to be alone.”

“It’s weird but I guess kinda romantic, when you think about it,” Joe said.

“Yes, it is. And it also means that I get to see what your father looks like in daylight,” Laura joked. “Otherwise we get up when it’s dark, and I come home when it’s dark.”
Father Michael couldn’t resist. “I’m surprised you agreed to a daytime tryst, Laura. Who wants to see Jack in the bright light of day?”

Joe laughed. “Yeah, I have to see him every day when he picks me up from school!”

“Hey,” his dad replied, “I can always take away your driving privileges young man.”

“It’s not that long before I get my full license, and then you won’t be able to stop me, Dad!” Joe currently had to drive with his father in the passenger seat.

“Then whose vehicle are you hoping to drive?” his father warned.

The teenager’s face fell. “Oops! Well, I guess I can put up with seeing your face in the daylight for a while longer.”

“Gee, thanks!”

Joe turned to the priest. “Did you bring your riding gear, Father?”

“I sure did, son. What horse were you plotting to put me on?”

“I thought you’d do well on Papa, Father,” Jack said.

“Has he fully recovered from his colic?”

“Thank God, yes,” Jack replied.

“Thank God, indeed,” the pastor echoed.

The little paint had colicked and needed surgery the previous fall. It had been uncertain whether the old horse would survive, but mercifully he made it through.

“O.K. Father, time to change clothes!” Joe announced.

“They’re in my car. I’ll fetch them and meet you in the barn. I take it I can change in your restroom there?”

“Sure thing, Father!” Joe undoubtedly looked forward to telling his school friends about horse riding with a priest.

Fifteen minutes later Father Michael reappeared dressed in his corduroys and hiking boots. He was glad he’d brought a heavy parka, too. It was bitterly cold outside and not much better in the barn.

“You’ll need a helmet, Father,” Jack said. “Come with me and let’s see if I have one that will fit you.”

“Am I the only one riding?”

“ Heck no! Joe’s going to be on Duke and I’m bringing Bentley. But it’ll be a very gentle reintroduction, I promise.”

Once he’d found a helmet for the priest, the horse trainer led him to Papa’s stall. “Do you want to get him ready yourself, or would you rather one of us did it?”
The cleric stretched his hand out for the little horse to smell. He loved being in a barn with its associated smells. Hay, horse sweat and - yes - even the odor of manure. With a sharp twinge he remembered his parents’ little farm back in Charlottesville, Virginia - that last long weekend he’d spent there and the death of his beloved old horse Double Cream.

The paint stretched his neck over the half stall door. Gently the pastor stroked his muzzle, reaching up between the gelding’s eyes and rubbing his forehead. Papa’s eyes closed and he lowered his head. Father Michael exhaled; he and this horse were going to get on just fine.

“Where’s his kit? I’ll groom him.”

Giving the horse long brush strokes down his neck and chest was soothing for both of them. Using the rubber curry comb, Father Michael made small circular motions along his back and rump on both sides before brushing the hairs smooth again.

Papa had been munching hay, but forgot to eat soon after the grooming began. He stood with head hung low, licking his lips every so often and chewing what was left in his mouth - the picture of a relaxed horse.

He hardly moved when it came time to use the soft bristled brush on his face.

“You're a good boy,” Father told him. “Are you awake enough to pick up your feet for me?”

A few moments later Jack brought the saddle and bridle. “Do you need help putting them on?”

“How about I tack him up then you come and check my handiwork?”

“Sounds good. I’ll be over in a few minutes.”

Father Michael picked up the saddle blanket. “O.K. buddy, I think I can remember how to do this!” He laid the cloth on the horse’s back, in front of the withers, and slid it back into place. Then he lifted up the saddle and warned Papa, “You’ll need to be patient with me now.”

He placed it gently on the horse’s spine, being careful to pull the blanket up into the gullet under the center of the saddle. He recalled from his riding days to be sure that the blanket wasn’t pressing down on the withers, making the animal uncomfortable when the rider’s weight sank into his back.

With a critical eye he checked the lay of the saddle and adjusted it a couple more times before he was satisfied. He then attached the girth to the billet straps on each side and tightened it enough to be snug but not restrictive.

Jack reappeared. “Good job, Father. I can see you’ve done this before!”

“A few times, my lad, probably before you were even born.”

“Glad to see that dementia hasn’t set in yet, then. Here are his brushing boots. Just bring him out when you’re ready. Joe and I will be in the indoor arena.”

It took the priest a little longer than suited him to remember which way round to put on the protective boots. He was glad Jack wasn’t watching, and thankful when Papa was obliging about having the bridle put over his head - even opening his mouth without needing to be asked.
Father Michael, who had been a tad concerned about this enterprise, now felt a great deal more confident about getting on this kind gelding. “You’re really going to take care of me, aren’t you, buddy?”

He fastened on his helmet, pulled the reins over Papa’s head and led the paint down the aisle into the indoor arena attached to the barn. The priest was proud of himself for remembering to shout “Door!” at the entrance to alert Jack and Joe of his presence.

“Come on in!” Jack shouted. He brought his old grey show jumper Bentley to a walk and Joe did likewise on Duke, his handsome bay.

Father Michael took a deep breath. “O.K. Papa, here goes.”

One of the half doors was open and, after leading the horse through, he carefully closed it behind him. He walked over to the large black mounting block in the corner and the gelding stood quietly while the priest tightened the girth and pulled down the stirrups.

Jack rode alongside. “Need any help?”

“I hope not!”

The pastor quickly found himself in automatic mode as he swung into the saddle, grateful that his mount was so well-behaved.

Joe pulled up next to his father. “You’re a natural, Father!”

“It’s a bit early to say that, but we’ll see.” The priest took up the reins and tried not to feel self-conscious as he watched Jack and his son move off effortlessly into trot and canter around the arena. Being more advanced in dressage than his father now - hence the need for an instructor, Father thought ruefully - Joe was performing canter pirouettes and half-passes. Those were movements to which the priest had aspired in his youth, but he stopped riding well before reaching that level.

Pleased that he could steer Papa at walk, he soon asked for trot. The other two tactfully left him to get reacquainted with this activity, but he was glad they were on hand in case of emergency.

It felt weird to be on a horse again. The sensation of an animal moving underneath him was alien and he appeared to have no control over it. But this gentle soul listened to his faltering aids and did his best to accommodate them. The priest’s confidence grew and soon he was genuinely enjoying himself.

It almost made him sorry that he couldn’t do this more often. But that would be bordering on idolatry, he told himself. He shouldn’t get too attached to riding and instead should be concentrating on saving the souls of his parishioners.

This line of thinking brought his mind back sharply to what he wanted to ask Jack. He must find an opportunity to talk to him alone.

After half an hour the emotional and physical effort of riding were taking its toll on him. He brought Papa back down to a walk and let out the reins. “If I’m tired, you must be too, buddy.”
He allowed the horse to wander around the arena, carefully staying out of the others’ way, and noticed Laura leaning over the doors. She beamed and clapped. “Bravo, Father! You look good up there!”

He walked Papa over. “I have to admit, I am having a great time. I’m glad Joe suggested this.”

“When did you last ride?”

“Several decades ago!”

“Well, I hope you’ll come back and do it again.”

Father Michael touched the rim of his helmet. “Thank you, I’d like that. Now I’m going to try and get off this horse without falling over.”

“Let me help you.” Laura came in and held Papa to allow the cleric to concentrate on dismounting. “I remember when Jack first put me on a horse. My legs wouldn’t work at all after I got off.”

“I suspect it’s going to be the same for me.”

Sure enough, as soon as his feet touched terra firma, his knees buckled and he staggered backwards to keep from falling.

“Thank goodness you’ve got Papa! That was inelegant enough, without my jabbing him in the mouth.”

“You’re welcome, Father. Would you like me to lead him back to his stall?”

It was embarrassing to admit that his legs wouldn’t let him do such a simple task, but pride is a sin, he reminded himself. He nodded gratefully and watched her lead his mount out while he hobbled haltingly over to the exit.

Behind him Jack’s voice called, “You O.K., Father?”

The priest tried to come up with a joke but failed. All his energy was needed to walk out of the arena.

“There’s a chair just outside the door. You may want to sit down and rest your legs for a while.”

Without turning round, Father Michael waved his hand in acknowledgement. “Thanks Jack, I think I’ll do just that.” He sank into the soft cushioned chair, as Jack dismounted and led Bentley through the doorway, followed by Joe and Duke.

“Hey, Father,” the teenager said, “it was great to see you on a horse! Will you come back and do it again?”

“I’ll be able to answer that question as soon as my legs have recovered, son.”

“Yeah, I forget what it’s like to get on a horse when you’re not used to it. Do they feel like noodles?”

“That’s a good description. How long before they feel like proper legs again?”
“A while. But Dad’s got some arnica pills in the tack room. I’ll get them for you - they do wonders with soreness and bruising.”

“Thanks.”

As he sat waiting for his noodles to gain strength, it occurred to him that now might be a good time to talk to Jack while he untacked Bentley and brushed him down. With a long groan he forced himself out of the chair. It took a supreme effort and the help of the aisle walls, but he made it to Bentley’s stall.

The hair under the horse’s neck and chest had been clipped, so a burgundy blanket was draped over the animal to keep him warm against the cold. Jack peeled it back over the quarters to brush the saddle and girth areas.

The pastor leaned heavily over the half door of the stall.

Jack laughed. “You look terrible!”

“Thank you. Er - there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.” Jack groaned and stopped in mid-brush stroke. “Please don’t tell me some young man needs my help.”

“You’ll be glad to know that I currently have no youngsters whose parents are pressing for my aid.”

“That’s a relief.”

“However - “

“Here it comes!”

“However,” Father Michael said more forcefully, “I do have an adult in need of your assistance.”

“However,” Jack mimicked just as strongly, “I don’t assist people. I assist their horses, remember?”

“But you may recall my telling you recently that you are at your happiest when helping people.”

“With all due respect, your saying so doesn’t make it true, Father.”

“Of course not.” The pastor bowed his head. “And yet it is true.”

Jack sighed. “Fine, let’s hear it.” He went back to brushing Bentley.

Undeterred by the horse trainer’s reluctance - he’d encountered it enough times not to be put off - Father Michael outlined his proposal.

“It’s a great idea, Father, but I’m not sure I’m the right one to help.”

“Would you at least try this and see if it works?”

“Can’t do any harm.”

“Thank you, Jack. God bless you for your openness to His plans.”

“I’m not sure that accurately describes my present attitude, but I’ll take the blessing anyway.”
“That's the spirit! When should we come over?”

Father drove home with his legs feeling as battered as his sedan, but inside he felt wonderful.

He picked up the rosary nestling in his center console. He prayed as many decades as he could before arriving home, in gratitude for a good visit with the Harpers and with high hopes for the success of the plan the Holy Spirit had planted in him.

Soon he could feel the arnica pills easing his sore noodles.
Chapter Seven: Justin
Monday, February 6th

Father Michael called Simon that night.

“I know this is short notice, but dinner with you last week got me thinking more seriously about what can be done for Justin. I have an idea. Do you think you can get him to come over to Jack Harper’s place with me tomorrow afternoon? And could you come along for moral support?”

“Moral support for Justin or you?”

“Both of us.”

“Sure, Father,” Simon said, “but what’s this all about?”

“It’s better if I don’t say.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want Justin to believe he’s getting out of the house for some fresh country air,” Father Michael replied.

“Well, isn’t that what we’ll all be doing?”

“Yes, but I’m hoping for more than that for Justin.”

“You’re being very mysterious, Father.”

The priest laughed. “You’re Catholic, Simon, you should be used to mysteries.”

“Very amusing. You’re just not going to tell me anything more, are you?”

“I’m not trying to be difficult, Simon, I promise. It’ll be better for Justin if I don’t elaborate. I don’t want to prejudice him against coming to the farm.”

“Well, if it’ll help my sainted brother-in-law then I’m all for it.” Simon’s voice sounded brighter.

Please God, let this work! “I have every confidence it will.” Lord, don’t let that be a lie! “I’ll pick you both up tomorrow afternoon. Will you be home by 5 p.m.?”

“I’ll make sure I am.”

“Excellent! See you then.”

Father Michael sat back in his leather armchair and pulled out the black beaded rosary he kept in his soutane pocket. He’d already prayed the first four of the five decades on the way home from Jack’s farm. “Lord, this last mystery is for the success of tomorrow’s enterprise.”

Today’s Mysteries were the Joyful ones, and the remaining decade was The Finding of Our Lord in the Temple as a twelve-year-old.

Under the protection of Christ and His Mother, Father Michael was sure tomorrow would go well.
Taking a deep breath he rang the doorbell of the Weinstock residence on Monday at 5 p.m. sharp.

The door was opened by a scowling Justin. Without greeting the priest, he looked over his shoulder and shouted, “Your spiritual shrink is here to take us for our trip to the petting zoo.” He then faced Father Michael with arms folded across his muscular chest. “That is right, isn’t it?”

It was clear that any ground the priest might have gained with Justin last week was now lost. They were back to square one, as if their conversation on the porch swing had never taken place. And yet he thought he saw a slight twinkle in the veteran’s eyes, as though Justin were testing the priest to see if he was made of the stuff a war-hardened soldier could respect.

Simon came to the door. “Hello, Father!” he said with forced cheerfulness and an anxious look at the defiant Justin. Simon was of slighter build than his wife’s brother, and it was easy to see that Justin intimidated him when the latter was in a bad mood, like today.

Father waved towards his vehicle. “Are you ready for a ride in the most beaten up car you’ve ever been in?”

Justin laughed drily. “Call that a beaten up car?”

“Don’t start, Justin,” Simon pleaded.

Father tried to defuse the situation. “I appreciate it’s not like your blown up vehicles in Iraq, Justin, but it’s the best I could find at short notice.”

“Well, as long as it moves.”

Simon exhaled quietly and they proceeded to the car, where Justin took the front seat.

Father Michael started the engine on his second attempt with an apology about how he knew the starter motor needed replacing.

Justin asked, “Where exactly is this petting zoo, Father?”

The trip to the barn was mercifully short but even so, the nerves of both the parish priest and his brother-in-law were stretched unbearably by the time the old vehicle swung through the electric gates of Harpers’ Reunion (with the apostrophe outside the ‘s’).

The field on one side was empty of horses and Father Michael surmised that they’d been brought in for the night. Wearing blankets against the February cold, the equine occupants of the other field awaited their turn to come in.

Jack was walking past the fountain, a halter and lead rope over his left shoulder. He waved at the approaching car and Father Michael manually wound down his window.

“Hi guys!” he said, stopping the vehicle.

“Come to help out around here?” Jack asked.

“Sure! Let me park and we’ll be out.”
“I thought we were here to see the animals, not help out with them!” Justin complained.
“You don’t have to help, if you don’t want to,” Father said evenly. “How about you, Simon?”
“I’d be happy to, if you think I be useful.”
“I’d be happy to,” mimicked Justin in a goody two shoes tone.
Jack fetched more halters and held them out to the three men exiting the car.
“I see, work first, introductions later, eh?” Father said.
“Oops!” Jack said. He put out his hand to Justin. “Hi, I’m Jack Harper.”
Without giving his name, Justin took the hand and Father saw Jack wince at the strength of the man’s grip. Either Justin didn’t know his own power or he was trying to bully the horseman on his own turf. Jack had the greater height, but Justin carried more bone and muscle.
Jack wasn’t that easily put off. “You’ve got quite a handshake there, buddy!”
“Oh, sorry, was that too much?” Justin replied insincerely.
Jack made a show of getting the feeling back in his fingers. “I think I’ll still be able to earn my living riding.” He turned to Simon with a smile of recognition. “Hey, I know you! You’re the guy who stopped me from snoring at Adoration last week!”
“I don’t recall that you were snoring, but you were certainly fast asleep. I’m Simon Weinstock.”
“Welcome to the farm, Simon and - the Man with the Strong Handshake.”
“His name is Justin,” Simon said mildly.
Father could tell he was seething inside and silently commended his self-restraint.
Jack held out the halters again. “So who’s going to help me bring in horses?”
Justin looked sullen while Father Michael and Simon each took a halter.
“I’ll need to be shown how,” Simon said.
“Come with me,” Father Michael told him, “We’ll follow Jack’s lead.”
The three walked towards the paddock gate where the horses were gathering.
“They know it’s time to come in, don’t they?” Simon said.
“Yeah. Horses love routine and it’s feeding time,” Jack replied.
“Do they kick?” Simon then asked.
“I’ll go in first and make sure they don’t,” the trainer reassured him.
Out of the corner of his eye Father Michael saw Justin looking at the little paddock next door. He was staring intently at the sole grey horse standing dejectedly by the gate. The animal was in terrible shape.
He looked like a Thoroughbred, no more than 16 hands high, with a neck so thin you could put your hands around his throat. His blanket hung off his skinny body and even without being able to see underneath, it was obvious there wasn’t an ounce of fat on him.

Not only that, but hair was missing everywhere and he had cuts all over his legs. And his left knee was enlarged. What on earth had happened?

Perhaps Justin was wondering the same thing as he wandered over to the horse?

Remembering the task at hand, Father looked away and concentrated on helping to catch one of the geldings by the gate. Jack was placing a halter on each horse, together with a lead rope thrown over its neck, and the priest was supposed to be showing Simon how to bring in a horse.

There were four animals, so with Justin not helping one was going to be left alone in the field.

“That’s O.K.” Jack said. “He’ll be company for Isaac until we come back to get both of them.”

The three of them led their horses out of the gate and sure enough the remaining one, a bright bay in a dark green blanket, whinnied and rushed over to Isaac for solace.

The priest was leading a well-behaved little black horse with the chiseled head and alert small ears typical of the Morgan breed.

He looked questioningly at Jack, who said, “He goes into the second to last stall on the right, with the name ‘Pygmalion’ on it.’ Make him wait while you take off his halter before he sticks his nose in his feed trough. We’ll be by later to switch blankets for the night.”

Father did as he was told, then placed the halter on the peg outside Pygmalion’s stall, which was close to the far end of the barn.

Keen to see what was happening with Justin, he walked down to the large sliding back door and opened it just enough to squeeze through. From his new post outside the building he could see and hear Justin by the grey horse’s paddock.

Jack had exited the barn at the front and was walking up to the veteran, with two halters. Father Michael heard him say, “Wanna bring Isaac in for me?” He held out one of the halters for Justin to take.

The soldier took it on reflex and watched Jack approach the chestnut horse, who put his head over the gate, anxious for his supper.

The trainer unlatched the gate and the gelding let him place the halter over his ears and fasten it under his jowls. The animal stood quietly, even though he’d been pacing up and down a moment earlier, and the priest appreciated how much time and patience had gone into teaching him to behave as soon as he was being handled.

Once he had led the horse out of the field, Jack turned to Justin, “Need some help? Have you done this before?”

Father held his breath. Justin was not one to admit weakness: he was more likely to explode in anger at Jack for suggesting that he didn’t know what to do.

But the veteran’s eyes were on Isaac. “What’s the deal with this guy? Why is he in such terrible shape?”
“That enlarged knee is from over flexing it in a race. Instead of repairing the damage, they just left it to ‘heal’ by itself. So he can’t bend it completely anymore. I’m keeping him here as a favor to the local horse rescue because they don’t have a separate field for him and he can’t be turned out with other horses, because they pick on him. Those cuts you see are from being beaten up whenever he tries to get to the food or hay or make friends with his own kind. He has a ton more hidden under that blanket.”

Justin’s voice was so soft Father Michael could hardly hear it. “He doesn’t fit in. He’s an outsider.”

“For right now,” Jack sounded upbeat. “He’ll make a full recovery over time.”

*Good for you, Jack! Making it clear this is a temporary situation.*

“Is he so thin because they wouldn’t let him eat?”

“Mainly. But also because his owner didn’t pay the bills and eventually he and his buddies stopped being given any food at all.”

Justin spat. “How can people do such things to animals?”

“It’s hard to fathom, isn’t it? All I can say is thank God the rescue got him and the others out of that paddock before he died of starvation.”

“What’s going to happen to him now?”

“Would you like to bring him in and I’ll tell you?”

Justin looked at the halter - held upside down in his hands - then at Jack. “I’ve never done this before.”

“It’ll be easy - Isaac is very quiet. Turn the halter the other way up - see how I have it on this horse?”

Father watched in fascination as Justin followed Jack’s instructions then opened the gate a little. He walked boldly up to Isaac and the horse backed away. “He’s scared of me!” The veteran sounded disappointed. “Why isn’t he standing still like your horse?”

“You’re a big strong guy and look threatening without meaning to. Turn sideways. It’ll make you look smaller.”

*Well done, Jack! We both know Justin thinks he can power his way through this.*

The large man wore a puzzled expression but did as Jack said. He then told the horse, “Hey, buddy, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Isaac observed him warily, one ear back and one ear forwards. Justin whispered under his breath (as Jack later told Father Michael), “Man, you have the most beautiful eyes!”

The grey’s ears pricked forwards and he pushed his nose out just a fraction.

Justin stood stock still. “Can I move towards him now?”

“Give it another minute or two and I think he’ll come to you.”
Father Michael could sense how badly Justin wanted the horse to react positively to him. He knew Jack was also willing the animal to approach the man. How long would the veteran wait for results?

*Please, God, make Isaac trust Justin!*

"Relax your shoulders and look at the ground, Justin. That'll help."

Amazingly the muscular man obeyed and adopted a neutral position.

Jack and Father Michael watched Isaac assess the man and gradually decide he wasn't a threat. In subsequent discussions they discovered they’d both been holding their breath as they observed the bony rescue take slow steps towards the broken soldier. The hyper-vigilant veteran knew the horse was coming but resisted the urge to look up or move. He breathed deeply and rhythmically to maintain calmness.

A few moments later Isaac’s nose touched the sleeve of Justin’s overcoat. Father Michael saw the hardened man smile and ever so slowly raise his hand to stroke the horse’s muzzle. In a low register he asked, “Can I look at him, now?”

“Yup! Keep things nice and easy and he’ll let you put on that halter, too.”

“Talk me through it, will you?"

“Glad to.”

Father said a silent prayer of thanksgiving for this small success.

Very gently, Justin put the halter on Isaac’s noble head. He looked at the animal with wonder and caressed his thin neck, while Jack stood silently by with the chestnut.

Father Michael well understood the awe which a horse inspires and thought of the saying, attributed to Sir Winston Churchill: ‘there is something about the outside of a horse which is good for the inside of man.’

It appeared to be true for Justin Chambers.

Jack said, “Shall we?”

Justin nodded and the trainer explained how to lead Isaac.

The pastor slid back into the barn and was waiting for them at the front entrance with Joe and Simon. Katie and ‘Flex lay down next to them.

“Did you see that?”

“Sure did, Father.” Simon was grinning. “I haven’t seen Justin this mellow since he got back from Iraq.”

“What’s the deal with that guy?” Joe asked.

“He’s in a rough place, son,” Simon said. “He fought abroad and is finding it hard to adjust to being in the U.S. again.”

Jack and Justin arrived at the barn with the two horses.
“O.K.” the priest said quickly, “let’s look busy, as if we never saw anything.”

It was quite a sight to see the burly man leading the skinny horse, but the three onlookers stopped staring, scuttled into the tack room and poured themselves coffee.

“Where’s Isaac’s stall?” they heard Justin ask.

“Next to this guy’s. Just follow me.”

Hearing the horses’ hooves clopping on the rubber matting down the aisle, the trio strolled out of the tack room and stood where they could watch without being too obvious.

The priest wished he could get closer. But it was important to leave Jack to deal with Justin, who seemed to respect the trainer’s ability with horses because of his new curiosity about Isaac. Any intrusion would break the fragile bonds that were forming.

Simon whispered, “Father, I’ll do whatever I can to keep this thing going - whatever ‘this thing’ is.”

“You and I can pump Jack for details later. But it looks as if Justin is taking an interest in something other than being angry with the world. That has to be a good thing.”

“He does seem to want Isaac’s approval.”

“I agree. I think he’s met a being whose opinion he actually cares about, as weird as that sounds.” Father Michael added, “And he doesn’t have to talk to him.”

“You may be onto something there,” Simon said. “Watch out, here they come.”

The three of them studiously drank their coffee and the mugs warmed their fingers against the cold.

Jack was chatting to Justin while they walked down the aisle, and the heavily muscled man was listening intently. Father Michael and Simon exchanged glances: the PTSD sufferer was actually behaving normally.

When the two men joined the others a while later, Justin became pensive again. His burst of chat was over.

Yet Father Michael was heartened by what he’d seen. “Jack, we should be getting out of your way. You’ve got plenty to do, I’m sure.”

Simon nodded. “You’ve been kind to let us intrude on your evening schedule, Jack. I enjoyed my first time leading a horse.”

The priest looked meaningfully at Jack, who said, “You’re welcome to come back any time, guys.”

It sounded sincere, even though Father Michael knew he didn’t mean it.

Yesterday, when they’d talked about bringing Justin over, Jack had made a huge point of saying that he wasn’t a therapist and why was Father making him do this?

“Because I need to see if Justin is scared of horses and if equine therapy is something we can pursue to help him heal.”
“I’m a horse healer, Father, remember? Not a person healer.”

“And I’m relying on your horses to heal Justin - not you.”

The slim man with tousled blond hair had no answer, beyond the habitual grimace he gave Father Michael whenever the pastor wanted him to help someone.

Hopefully even the curmudgeonly Jack was pleased with how things had gone this afternoon. The priest looked forward to calling him later to hear what Justin had said and done after putting Isaac back in his stall.

For now he and Simon thanked their host and walked to the dented sedan. But when they reached the car they realized Justin hadn’t followed them. He was talking to Jack.

Simon was embarrassed by the man’s apparent refusal to come home.

Father Michael said, “Let’s just sit in the car. He’ll have to leave eventually.”

Simon nodded. “I guess we should be happy that he’s talking civilly to someone. Look, he’s almost smiling at Jack!”

“Praise God,” Father Michael said with heartfelt thanks.

Justin shook Jack’s hand - less forcefully this time - and a milder form of his normal scowl returned on his short walk back to the vehicle. He slid wordlessly into the front seat and turned round to his brother-in-law. “Can I borrow your car on Friday? Jack’s asked me to help him work with Isaac.”

Jack, you star! I knew you’d come through!

“Sure thing, Justin,” Simon replied.

The atmosphere in the car was almost comfortable as Father Michael drove the two relatives back to the Weinstock residence.
Chapter Eight: Mixed Emotions

Monday, February 6th

Simon thanked Father for the trip, then rolled his eyes when the veteran got out of the vehicle without a word of acknowledgement to their driver.

The priest smiled with a gentle shake of his head that said ‘It's O.K. Simon, don't worry about it.’ He watched the two men walk into the house, hoping Justin’s mood had improved enough to keep him civil to his family.

Back at his small apartment, the answer machine was flashing. Hopefully Jack had already called to give him the lowdown of this afternoon’s events.

There were two messages: one from Bishop Thurston, the other from a number he didn’t recognize.

Always apprehensive about Bishop Thurston’s calls, he fast forwarded to the second message and immediately regretted it.

He may not have recognized the phone number but he certainly knew the caller. For some time now he was being bugged by Fred Stone, a local atheist who posted a monthly podcast on his website “Stone’s Throw.” He wanted to interview Father Michael, who had continually put him off with pleas of not having the time.

Thus far their correspondence had been by email. Over time the podcaster’s tone had become increasingly derisive and he was openly throwing accusations at the priest. “Are you too chicken to defend your faith?”

Now Mr. Stone had acquired Father Michael’s home phone number and, with unwarranted assumption in his tone, asked the pastor when might be a good time for them to do a phone interview? Unless Father wanted to come and talk in his studio?

The man was no longer asking for an interview - he was certain of one - and the reason for this became clear when the bishop’s message was played back.

“Father, I would very much like you to give Mr. Stone his interview. He thinks we’re hiding something and are afraid to face his questions. The only way to quash that is to go ahead and talk to him.

“If you don’t feel comfortable doing this, I am happy to ask another priest from the diocese.

“Please call me back to let me know your response.”

Father Michael groaned. He’d so hoped Fred Stone had given up on this podcast business!

*Lord, are You really calling me to do this or should I give the job to someone else?*

A forceful inner voice told him that it would be selfish to make another priest take the interview simply because he himself didn’t want to.
Fine! I’ll do it! But let me get something to eat before I call that man back. I promise to let Bishop Thurston know once I’ve set up the interview.

After a meal made of left-overs from the fridge, he said a quick prayer before punching the atheist’s number into his cell phone.

“Hello, Fred Stone here.”

“Good evening, this is Father Michael. You left a message about wanting to interview me on your podcast.”

“Oh, the bishop finally persuaded you to do it, did he?”

The man’s unpleasant attitude made it hard to be polite. “Something like that.” God, give me strength and don’t let me lose my temper!

“What does next week look like? We could do it over the phone or you could come into my modest little studio. It’s a garage conversion, but it has good heating, so you won’t freeze. Although I understand you Catholics go in for suffering.”

“Not unnecessary suffering,” the priest said evenly.

“Like dying on a cross?”

“We can discuss that in the interview.” This was going to be more difficult than he’d thought.

“So where’s it to be?”

It irked the priest that the man didn’t even have the decency to address him as ‘Father.’ He told himself to stop being prideful, to let it go and exhibit Christian humility in the face of blatant goading.

“And the answer is - ?”

Did he want a face to face meeting? Would that add weight to his answers? Or would it be best for them not to see each other so the man couldn’t get under his skin so easily?

“I’m waiting!”

“If I do this, we should get one thing straight, Mr. Stone. The correct address to a Catholic priest is ‘Father.’” This podcast was being aired publicly, so it actually wasn’t prideful to inform listeners on this point, he decided.

“O.K. Father. Now will you answer my question?”

“I’m a very busy man, so if you don’t mind I’d rather do a phone interview.” This conversation had brought Father Michael to the painful realization that he couldn’t trust himself to be in the same room with this atheist.

“Works for me. How about next Tuesday, Father?”

“I’m just looking at my calendar.” He walked over to his desk and checked next week’s appointments. “How long will it take?”

“I reckon about an hour. It depends how deeply we get into topics.”
“Then it had better be in the early evening. Say around 5 p.m.?”

“Sure.”

“And Mr. Stone? Would you kindly send me a list of the questions you’ll be asking? I’ll text you my email address.”

“I thought you priests knew everything off by heart?”

“I do, but I would like to be thoroughly prepared. That way I can give your audience more rounded answers. It will make for a much better podcast, don’t you think?”

It was getting late and he was exhausted, but as soon as he hung up the phone, Father Michael sent the man his email address before he forgot.

Then there was the bishop’s request to be informed once the interview was set up. Obedience being one of the cardinal rules of his state in life, Father Michael dialed the prelate’s number, hoping that he could just leave a message.

But his superior answered. “Hello, Bishop Edward Thurston speaking.”

“Good evening, Your Excellency, Father Michael here. I’m sorry to disturb you so late.”

“It’s about that wretched podcast, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“What did you decide?”

“I’ve set up a telephone interview on Tuesday at 5 p.m."

“Thank you, Father. I greatly appreciate it. And I suppose the man will want to air it before Easter. Tread carefully, won’t you? Is he sending you a list of questions ahead of time?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I asked him to.”

“Good! We don’t want to get tripped up by trick questions, do we?”

“Indeed not!” Father Michael replied.

“Well, let me know how it goes.”

“I will.”

“Good night then, Father.”

“Good night, Your Excellency.”

During this call the priest heard a familiar ping from his cell announcing the arrival of an email. It was most likely the dreaded list of questions from Mr. Stone. Should he look at them now or wait until morning, when he would be more refreshed and able to deal with them? He decided that looking at them now would likely end in little sleep for him.

_O.K. Lord, it can wait until the morning._

He said his evening prayers and went to bed.
Chapter Nine: Juggling Life
Tuesday, February 7th - Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday

He rose as usual at 5 a.m. the next morning and opened his breviary to recite the morning prayers.

After a modest breakfast of coffee and muesli, he looked over the Mass readings and the Gospel for the day to determine the message for his sermon at the 8 a.m. Mass.

The whole time there lurked in the back of his mind an awareness of something disagreeable, which he couldn’t pinpoint until his early duties were complete. Then he remembered: Mr. Stone and his podcast.

He looked at his watch: 7 a.m. Plenty of time before leaving to prepare for Mass. With a resigned sigh he picked up the cell phone and checked his emails.

Mr. Stone had indeed sent the list of dreaded questions, but there was also a message from Jack. This was a pleasant surprise and the priest much preferred to read that one first. He was all for starting his days on a good note: the less positive aspects of it could wait.

‘Hi Father, I know you’re dying for feedback from Justin’s visit here yesterday so I thought I’d put you out of your misery.

‘He’s not a very talkative person, is he? But I guess people who haven’t been through what he has can’t even begin to understand, so why bother talking to them?

‘Isaac seemed to affect him pretty deeply because he asked me whether a horse that’s been beaten up so badly can recover. I wasn’t sure whether he meant recover physically or emotionally and didn’t like to inquire. It probably touched too close to home.

‘So I told him that the physical wounds would heal pretty quickly and the hair would grow back over them. It would take longer for his self-confidence to return and what he needed was to learn to feel comfortable with one person first. That would make his journey go faster.

‘Justin nodded his head and seemed to be listening. Isaac had finished his feed and was starting on his hay, so Justin asked if he could stroke him again.

‘I said ‘sure, he’d like that’ and pretended to be doing something with the horse next door so they could have time alone.

‘I came back to find Justin still stroking the horse’s neck. When Isaac lifted his head to chew on a mouthful of hay, Justin rubbed his forehead. It was touching to watch such a burly man be so gentle, and Isaac was basking in the attention.

‘Something good was happening - for both of them - so I asked Justin if he’d like to come back on Friday. He simply nodded and I could swear that he was about to cry.

‘So, my friend, I hope you’re happy. Here I am, doing what you always want me to - helping people - when I should be helping horses. Although I suppose at a stretch I could say that Isaac is being helped.
‘Best regards,

‘Jack

‘P.S. Yes, you’re invited to come along on Friday if you like.

‘P.P.S. Don’t get any ideas - I’m still not a therapist.’

Father Michael laughed. How typical of Jack to go along with God’s plans while making it clear that it was under duress!

It pleased him enormously that Jack thought Isaac was helping Justin. The priest could now contact official equine therapy programs for the veteran. Yesterday’s trip to Harpers’ Reunion had definitely answered the question of whether Justin could even tolerate horses.

That Wednesday evening when Simon had woken Jack up during Adoration, the Holy Spirit had prompted the priest to find out whether horses can heal PTSD and he sent up a prayer of thanksgiving that God had guided them all this far.

He would look at his calendar after morning confessions and see if he had time on Friday to join Jack and Justin. He hoped the solider wouldn’t mind his presence.

It occurred to him to take the veteran to Harpers’ Reunion himself, so Justin wouldn’t have to borrow his brother-in-law’s car. Simon needed to be at work and the priest could also take Justin earlier in the day.

He found himself thinking about Justin and Isaac to avoid worrying about Fred Stone and his podcast. But his first duty was to the bishop not the fun of working with horses, and he needed to look at that list of questions.

Mercifully, the line of penitents waiting after Mass was short, and they were his ‘regulars’ as he called them. They came to confession every month or week throughout the year and understood the need to be in a State of Grace before receiving Holy Communion. As a result their lists of sins weren’t long.

Father Michael wished the other parishioners wouldn’t allow several months to pass between confessions.

He was back in his office by 9:15 a.m. and forced himself not to indulge the desire to look at his calendar to see if Friday afternoon was free. Instead he pulled up Fred Stone’s email on the PC screen sitting on his cluttered desk.

It was so hard to find Christ in Mr. Stone when he read the man’s list of ten piercing questions! But they shouldn’t have been surprised him: it was always open season on the Catholic Church. People had somehow formed the erroneous idea that Catholics feel superior to members of other religions.

Well, this was his chance to explain how untrue that is and he should be grateful for it.

He went through the list again. To fully answer them was going to take a lot more than an hour.

On the other hand, I doubt he’s going to listen to a full explanation. I’ll have to explain Catholicism in a nutshell if I’m to get my points across.
The interview would be a grueling exercise in brevity, which required serious work. He must write down his answers exactly as he wanted to give them. Unaware that the priest would be reading from a script, Mr. Fred Stone couldn’t make any snide comments over the phone about the cleric not knowing his faith.

He made a note, in both his cell phone and the large book calendar on his messy desk, to start writing the answers to at least two questions a day over the next five days. He would use the remaining time after that to fine tune them.

This chore gave him the chance to check his Friday appointments. Even after allowing two hours for work on the upcoming “Stone’s Throw” podcast interview, he had time unspoken for early in the afternoon.

He dialed Simon’s number to offer to take Justin. His brother-in-law didn’t answer the phone, so Father Michael left him a message.

This reminded him to thank Jack for his kindness in emailing him about Justin.

‘Don’t worry,’ the pastor wrote, ‘I know you’re not a therapist. But I do appreciate your letting me find out whether being around horses was of any use to Justin. My aim is to have him enroll in a certified equine therapy program, if he’s willing.

‘Simon told me that Justin was in talk therapy for two years and it didn’t help at all. According to my research, being around horses can be a great way to heal PTSD sufferers.

‘Thanks to your generosity, this looks like a real possibility for Justin and it’s good of you to let him come back and spend more time with Isaac. Maybe after this second visit I’ll be able to ask him about entering a local program.

‘Thank for your invitation to come on Friday. I’ll see if I can pick Justin up and bring him with me.

‘Yours in Christ,

‘Father Michael

‘P.S. Despite not being a therapist and not wanting to work with people, you’re pretty good at both.’

He inserted a winking emoji and pressed ‘Send.’

* * *

Later that day Simon called back.

“I got your message, Father, and it really would help me out if you could drive Justin to Jack’s place. I’ll need to ask him first, though. I think he’d set his mind on going alone and may not take kindly to our making different plans for him.”

“I understand,” Father Michael said. “If you don’t mind my asking, how have things been at home since Monday’s visit?”

“There’s a definite change in him. It’s not huge but it’s an improvement. He’s not quite so sharp around us and I really believe it’ll help if he can spend more time hanging out with that horse.”
“I’m happy to hear that and hope we can get him into an equine therapy program soon.”

“What’s that?”

Father explained to him how - as in Justin’s case - most veterans with PTSD don’t want to share their experiences or feelings with people they know, let alone someone they’ve never met before, like a human therapist. With their deep trust issues, how can they possibly open up to a stranger?

That’s why talk therapy usually doesn’t work and veterans don’t care to continue with the sessions.

Simon agreed. “That’s so true. Justin finally did tell his sister how his therapist was trying to make him ‘confront the reality’ of what had happened when he was Iraq. He was already unable to escape those realities - why would he want to dwell even more on them?

“The sessions weren’t helping at all. Justin just sat there saying nothing and eventually his therapist gave up on him. His wife didn’t want to deal with him, either, especially when she believed he wasn’t even trying to get better.

“That’s why he came to stay with us. Now that you’ve met the man whose wife didn’t want him around anymore, you can understand her problem.”

Father Michael gave a terse laugh, then explained how, during Adoration, it was Simon who’d given him the idea that maybe horses could help. The priest already knew that dogs can help heal veterans, and Jack had two of them on his farm. Maybe they’d be useful?

But he’d used the keywords ‘animals helping with PTSD’ and up came a slew of articles about equine therapy and how it accelerated the healing process.

“How does that work exactly?” Simon asked.

“Connection. A horse doesn’t judge a person: he accepts him as he is. He doesn’t say ‘Hey, I know what horrible things you did in Iraq and what horrible things you’ve seen.’

“The veteran connects with the animal on an unspoken, emotional level. He doesn’t have to talk to the horse - compassion and empathy flow powerfully in silence between the two of them.

“And because the horse takes the veteran as he or she is in that moment, all the human has to do is be kind. The veteran has a clean slate, if you like. He’s starting from zero. He has the chance to be a good person again - in his own eyes and those of the horse.

“He gradually learns to trust the animal and this slowly leads to trusting other people - and himself.

“Veterans with anger issues learn that a horse reacts to how they treat him. They want the horse to like them, and work hard at controlling their impulses. And that transfers to their behavior towards humans. They’re able to work through all their issues in this way: first with a horse and then with their families and other people.”

“Wow!” Simon said. “You’re a real encyclopedia of knowledge about this!”

“Not at all. I’ve only looked into it in a small way. But enough to know that it could really help your brother-in-law.”
“Based on Monday, I’d agree. But we must be careful. I don’t want him to think he’s being manipulated.”

“I expect his next visit will reinforce how much a horse can help him. It should be easy to convince him to enter a proper equine therapy program very soon.”

“I hope you’re right, Father. That would be awesome!”

“Yes, it would. Will you talk to Justin about my picking him up on Friday and let me know if he’s O.K. with that?”

“I will. Thanks so much! This is the first time I’ve seen a glimmer of hope for Justin and our family.”

“Thank Jack,” Father Michael said, “he’s the one who made it possible.”

“I’ll be sure to, Father.”

Dear Lord, I’m sorry to keep asking for Your Help, but please could you nudge Justin to let me drive him to Jack’s place on Friday?

Immediately his conscience prodded him to start work on those questions for the podcast interview right now.

But I planned to do that this afternoon! he protested, to no avail.

Michael, do you want Me to give Justin that nudge or not?

Father smiled ruefully. This was so like his typical conversations with Jack, where the priest would push him into doing something for the good of others, the trainer would push against him and back and forth they’d go, with God winning in the end.

As, of course, He would do now.

Unable to squelch a sigh, Father Michael pulled up Fred Stone’s email and printed out the questions. He then asked his secretary to make sure he had a full hour of peace - unless someone was dying - and promptly put his mind to the task of producing succinct yet persuasive responses.

Lord, please keep me in charity towards this man and help me to spread Your Word effectively.

Being Shrove Tuesday, the priest made himself available for Confessions until late that evening, in preparation for the next day, Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent.
Chapter Ten: Justin
Friday, 10th February

Nothing prevented Father Michael from picking Justin up at 3:30 p.m. on Friday.

The veteran had been agreeable to the idea once Simon pointed out that he could be at the barn earlier and stay for longer.

Today there were no petting zoo jibes when he opened the front door. He didn’t actually smile but he didn’t say anything nasty either.

Cognizant of the fact that people with PTSD hate trivial conversation, Father Michael was careful not to talk during their short trip. Justin seemed fine with that, looking out of the car window with more interest than last time.

They soon reached the new Harpers’ Reunion sign - a wrought-iron square with the name emblazoned on it in large gold letters. The electric gates swung open and as the car progressed up the drive they observed blanketed horses grazing peacefully in their large paddocks.

A white-orbed sun hung in the clear sky, diffusing bright rays over the farm and lifting Father Michael’s spirits despite the bitter February cold. He hoped it was doing the same for Justin, who needed the respite. No one could understand the demons he fought every day.

Simon had once remarked to him how Justin never seemed to sleep. At night he could hear the veteran pacing back and forth in his bedroom or watching TV - and knew he was drinking heavily, even after imbibing more than enough before the family retired to bed.

And Justin himself had mentioned to Father, in their one conversation, how he didn’t want to sleep because then he faced all the terrors of Iraq in his dreams. Hopefully Isaac would bring some peace into his life.

They were now nearing the fountain and Justin looked towards the thin animal’s paddock.

Jack came out of the barn dressed against the freezing temperatures in a heavy down coat and a bomber style hat on his head with the ear flaps down.

Before exiting Father’s vehicle, Justin drew the hood of his old duffle coat over his head and pulled on thick gloves. Also wearing heavy gloves, Jack instinctively held out a hand to greet his visitor.

The two men grinned and Jack shook his head. “I guess that’s not going to work with these things on.”

“Nope,” said Justin. “But ‘hello’ anyway.”

This was a good sign, Father thought as Jack nodded his acknowledgement to the priest.

“Come with me and get a halter, if you will,” he said to the veteran. “The temperature’s dropping early this afternoon so I may as well bring Isaac in now. I’ll fetch one of his field buddies to keep him company.”

“Don’t bring him in on my account,” Justin said.
“Even with a thick blanket that horse is too thin to stay out when it gets down to freezing and below, no matter what time of day it is. Believe me, he’s ready to come in.”

“O.K. if you’re sure.” The veteran followed the horseman into the barn.

Father Michael wasn’t certain whether he should stay in the car and keep warm or go into the heated tack room where he could be out of the way.

Simple economics won. Rather than waste expensive gas running the engine, he turned it off. Drawing his black woolen overcoat around him, he got out.

That and the black ski gloves in the pockets were a Christmas gift from his parents two years ago. That was the last time he’d seen his father before the stroke from which he never recovered and the thought reminded him: he was overdue for a visit to both his dad and his mother who now lived alone. *Honor thy father and thy mother, Michael.*

He closed the Toyota door with bare hands and wished he’d worn his gloves when his skin nearly stuck to the handle. He hurriedly put them on.

Jack and Justin were emerging from the barn, halters in hand. Hopefully Justin wouldn’t mind if the priest observed him catching Isaac.

He walked to the building and watched from just inside the door, to avoid annoying the veteran. He stomped his feet to prevent his toes from going numb. Even in these gloves, which supposedly allowed skiers to survive -30° Fahrenheit, he had to keep hitting his hands hard against his sides to keep any feeling in his fingers.

It was too late now to fetch his woolen hat from the car, for Justin was in Isaac’s field and carefully standing sideways.

He called once, very softly, to the horse grazing some way off. When the gelding didn’t respond, Justin looked at Jack for guidance. The priest later asked Jack what they were saying.

“It’s fine to go up to him, Justin. Approach his shoulder so he can see you. Don’t be timid, but don’t pressure him either. You need a kind of half-way attitude.”

“You mean be assertive without being a bully?” Justin offered.

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

The veteran gave a sardonic smile. “Let’s see if I can pull that off.”

Jack judged it best not to respond and let the man find his own way.

Father Michael held his breath while Justin eased towards the gelding’s shoulder, careful not to look directly at the horse. He came within a few feet of Isaac, eyes down, and halted.

*Please God, make Isaac respond!*

The grey lifted his head level with his withers in a posture of curiosity rather than anxiety.

*This is good!* Father Michael thought, stamping his feet and clapping his gloved hands together while his breath left his mouth in a cloud of frozen steam.
“Hey, buddy, it’s me again.” Eyes still lowered, Justin pulled the glove off his right hand and held it out while continuing forwards until the gelding could reach out and sniff it.

The veteran stood still and Isaac touched his hand, ears pricked towards him. Justin later said that the animal’s muzzle hairs were tickling his palm and it took a lot of willpower to keep it stretched out instead of snatching it back and frightening Isaac. That was the last thing he wanted to do.

The horse gave a snort then went back to grazing.

Justin knew the gelding wasn’t afraid of him now. He walked right up and slid the lead rope around his neck. “Come on, buddy, time to bring you in from the cold.”

He put the halter over the horse’s nose and gently pulled him away from the grass. He rubbed Isaac’s forehead as on that first day, then took the lead rope and gave a little click with his tongue.

Isaac quietly followed him to the gate. He stood still for the soldier to open it and lead him through to where Jack was holding another horse.

Father Michael wanted to shout ‘Alleluia!’ but that would have given him away. Instead he slid into the tack room and made it look as if he’d been there all the time. The two men walked past the glass-paned door and took their charges down the aisle to their stalls.

Five minutes later Jack came into the tack room.

“I saw you spying on him out there!”

“Wouldn’t you have?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, there you go. What’s Justin doing now?”

“I don’t know. I judged it best to leave him and Isaac alone. As you so tactfully pointed out, it’s the horse doing the healing, not me.” He gave a sly smile.

“Then let’s have some coffee.” Father Michael badly needed internal heat.

“I can’t stay long, Father, I have horses to bring in and horses to ride. But I will have a quick mug with you.”

“Good!”

The two of them sat and chatted about how things were going with Laura and Joe. “Have you reconciled yourself to having a wife who works long hours this time of year?”

“Let’s just say that I’m looking forward to April, when all this madness is over and we can go on our real honeymoon.”

“Ah! Your trip to the Caribbean, right?”

“Yup. A week on St. John’s in the U.S. Virgin Islands, courtesy of our parents.”

“Sounds truly romantic, Jack. You’ll both need it by then. And how’s fatherhood treating you?”
“Joe’s a good kid, although he can be a bit of a handful sometimes. Like every eighteen year old he thinks he knows everything.”

“But I hope he’s not disrespectful.”

“If he is, his mother and I change his mind pretty quickly for him.” Jack looked at his watch. “I have to get on, I’m afraid. Feel free to drink more coffee. It’s brutal out there!”

“See you, Jack.”

The trainer left the priest wondering how much longer he should leave Justin with Isaac. But Jack returned almost immediately with a perplexed expression and indicating with his forefinger for the priest not to speak. In a lowered voice he said, “Father, I just walked down the aisle towards Isaac’s stall. It sounds as if Justin is crying in there.”

Father had read enough about PTSD and horse therapy to know that this was a good thing. Justin’s letting go of everything bottled up inside. Isaac is helping him release the anger, fear, sorrow, self-loathing - every bad emotion. We need to let him be.”

“How the heck can one horse manage all that?” Jack asked.

Remembering what he’d told Simon, the priest said, “Horses accept us as we are, Jack. They help us wipe the slate clean when we meet them for the first time. If we’re good to them, that’s all they care about. They’re not interested in our past.

“That’s hugely important for someone in Justin’s position. I don’t know what he was doing in Iraq. But we can be sure it was really terrible. He’ll have done some horrendous things and seen horrendous things being done. That’s stuff he can’t tell a single human being without fear of being judged.

“He probably senses Isaac understanding him because he’s so badly beaten up himself. You can see the horse has no self-confidence. Maybe Justin feels that he can help him rebuild it, just as Isaac is helping Justin rebuild himself.”

Jack was in awe. “I’ve always been so fixated on healing horses’ wounds that I’ve never appreciated how they can heal ours.”

“It’s a win-win, isn’t it? God knew what He was doing when He made the horse.”

“Amen to that!” Jack said. “But now I feel I can’t ride the rest of my equine clients.”

“I’d say just ignore what’s going on in Isaac’s stall and go about your business. Justin will join us when he’s ready.”

“O.K. if you say so.” Jack waved and left the room.

With no one to watch him, Father Michael fell to his knees and thanked God for the success of Justin’s second meeting with Isaac.

Now all that remained was to get the veteran to join formal equine therapy sessions. But the priest had a hunch this may be difficult.
He then quickly remembered that he and Jack were instruments of the Holy Spirit. They were not alone in their endeavors and should trust God to provide whatever they needed to help Justin. Hadn’t He done that so far?

He slipped out of the tack room to fetch his breviary from the car - and his woolen hat. He kept the large volume with him at all times, for he could not rely on being able to say his prayers at the appointed times of day and often had to snatch moments when they presented themselves. He absorbed the readings and psalms in peace during this enforced time of idleness.

Meanwhile, in his mysterious way, Isaac was helping the veteran heal.

It must have been a good hour before Jack returned to the tack room. Father looked up at him with questioning eyes.

“I heard him stand up after I walked past Isaac’s stall,” Jack said. “My guess is that he’ll come looking for us pretty soon.”

“I’ll stay here, then. He’ll return to the world of humans when he’s ready. There’s no hurry.”

Taking a bridle off its hook, Jack carried it over to the basin and washed off the bit. “Thankfully it’s Robert’s mother’s turn to bring Joe home. We alternate days,” he explained.

“How are they both doing? It must be tough for Joe to be in the same year as Robert, even though he’s almost a year older.”

“Seems like Joe got used to that a long time ago. It’s tough having a December birthday, but I think he’ll be more mature by the time he graduates from high school. Plus, with his colitis, it’s great for him to have a good friend in the classroom - and in the dining area.”

“Yes. What does he do about meals?”

“He takes food from home. The school provides lunch - as at those prices it should! - so Joe stands out by having different food. But Robert’s mother told me that her son sometimes takes his own lunch to school, just to keep Joe company.”

“That kid has a great support system!”

“Yeah. The only problem is keeping him on his diet. Being eighteen, he doesn’t like to be restricted and we’ve had some issues now and then.”

“But having you as an example must be useful, surely?”

Jack wiped off the bit, hung it up and rinsed the basin clean. “In the early days it did, but you know the saying: Familiarity breeds contempt. Having a dad who eats the same boring food that he needs to is old hat now.”

“Already? I hope that doesn’t mean that he’s been flaring again?”

“We’ve had some problems, but they’re always an opportunity for me to find better ways to overcome them. There’s so much more information out there than when I was first diagnosed.”

At this point the door opened and Justin came in. He walked over to the basin and turned on the tap. He threw cold water over his face and looked into the small mirror hanging on the wall above the faucets.
Wordlessly, Jack opened the narrow cupboard next to the washstand. He pulled out a clean towel and handed it to the veteran, who nodded and dried his face and hands on it. His expression was tired but peaceful.

“You keep a tidy ship here, Jack,” he said approvingly, draping the wet towel over the edge of the basin.

“I have to, with so many horses coming and going.”

“How many do you ride a day?”

“Usually about six, and my two riders take four or so of their own. People seem to view winter as an opportunity not to ride their horses and a chance to get some extra training into them by yours truly.”

“So you’re busier now than during the rest of the year?”

“It sure feels like it!”

“Then I sincerely appreciate your taking the time to spend with me.”

“Isaac spent time with you, not me.” Jack smiled gently.

“He’s a great little guy.” Justin cleared his throat and turned to the priest. “Father, have you ever spent time with horses?”

“Oh, yes. I used to own a horse when I was younger.”

“He also came to ride last week,” Jack added.

“So I’m the only newbie?”

“You may be new to horses, Justin, but you’re opening my eyes to new side of them.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I was telling Father here how my job is healing the horses, and now I see how the horses -”

Father Michael cringed. Jack was really putting his foot in it.

But Justin laughed. “Don’t worry, Father, I’m not going to hit the roof.” He looked slightly embarrassed as he asked Jack, “Are you O.K. if I come back regularly to check on my buddy?”

“You come by any time you like. Isaac feels comfortable with you, so you’re doing him a favor.”

“Nice back-peddling, Jack, but we all know who’s doing whom the favor here.”

Jack shook his head. “Let me just say this: if it weren’t for horses I’d have gone mad a long time ago.”

“Straight up?”

“For real. Horses have saved my sorry butt many times!”

Justin nodded thoughtfully. “Good to know I’m not the only one.”
"No sir!" Jack rested a hand briefly on his shoulder - something which no one in Justin’s family would dare do. “Can I pour you some coffee? I’m getting some."

“Thanks, that’d be great. It’s a little chilly out there. ”

The three men sat around the tack room chatting. In the middle of their conversation a text came through from Joe saying that he was spending the night with Robert. It wasn’t unusual for this to happen, Jack said, and Robert often stayed with the Harpers, since his dog lived with them. Robert’s mom knew what Joe could and couldn’t eat, so there were no concerns there, either.

Jack shared the story with Justin about how he’d come to be a horse trainer and the priest could tell he wanted to know Justin’s story as badly as he did. But it was too soon to ask. The veteran would share if and when he was ready.

Father Michael’s cell phone rang and he recognized the number: it was a lady parishioner whom he was helping through bereavement after the recent death of her daughter.

“I have to take this,” he said, taking off his right glove and pressing the answer button. He walked out of the room. “Hello, Mrs. Davis? Is everything alright?”

He spoke to her for a while then hung up and returned to the tack room. “I’m afraid I need to get back to the church and meet with someone. Sorry to break this up, but Justin, are you ready to go home?”

“Sure, Father. I need to be getting back anyway. Family dinner is usually on the table at 6 o’clock.”

But Jack said, “My wife won’t be home till late, and Joe is staying overnight with a friend. Would you like to stay here for dinner? The menu is very limited I’m afraid, but I’d love the company. I can drive you home afterwards.”

Father Michael couldn’t believe his ears. Was this really Jack speaking? The same Jack who intensely disliked being around people and who had to be pushed hard to help them even a tiny bit?

“Is that O.K. with you, Father?” Justin asked. “I’m sure my family won’t miss me if I’m not there tonight. I’ll call and let them know. They’ll be happy for a break from their brother-in-law.”

“Absolutely! That will allow me to get back to the rectory sooner.”

Taking his leave of the horse trainer and the veteran, the priest wished he could stay and eat with them. He had a strong feeling that Justin was going to open up tonight after his cathartic experience with Isaac today.

And he’d missed his chance to ask Justin if he’d be willing to go into official equine therapy.

Replacing his right glove, the priest walked out of the barn into the cold and turned his focus to Mrs. Davis.

Her daughter, Samantha, had died seven months ago, and she had barely managed to get through Christmas without her. Now Easter was looming - another first without her new college graduate. The twenty-one year old had died in a car accident when a dumpster truck hit her tiny
Fiat 500. The artery in her right leg was severed and she bled out before MediVac could get her to the nearest trauma center.

Mrs. Davis had not been allowed to see her daughter while the EMT worked on her during the wait for the helicopter, nor had she been allowed to accompany her on the flight to hospital.

Samantha had reportedly still been alive at the scene and her mother had difficulty forgiving the medics for robbing her of those precious last moments with her child. It was patiently explained to her at the time that the EMT needed to work on her unhindered if there were any chance of saving Samantha’s life.

But Mrs. Davis, who’d buried her husband only two years ago, remained very bitter about not being able to say goodbye. It made Samantha’s death all the more unbearable and she often needed to talk to Father Michael about her inability to forgive those who had kept her away at such a crucial time.

She was already sitting in her black Nissan Altima outside the parish office when the priest swung into his parking space.

They both exited their vehicles and he waved a gloved hand at her. “Good evening, Mrs. Davis. Come in from the cold and let’s get a hot drink inside us, shall we?”

He was doing what he did best - offering comfort and solace to a fellow human being in need of empathy and an explanation of why God does such apparently evil things to those He supposedly loves.

A more peaceful Mrs. Davis left an hour later and Father Michael checked his watch. There was just enough time for another meal of left-overs from the fridge before saying his evening prayers and tackling a few more of those interview questions from Mr. Stone.

While eating a roughly put together sandwich of ham and cheese, washed down by a glass of filtered water, he clicked the email on his phone to begin pondering on the next few podcast issues.

He hoped his subconscious, together with help from the Holy Spirit, would work on them while he first ate and then prayed. Perhaps some efficacious answers would present themselves by the time he sat at his computer to write them down? It was hard to switch gears from Justin’s session with Isaac to Mrs. Davis and her grief and now to writing apologetics for the Catholic Church.

A priest’s life was certainly never dull!
Tonight’s first topic was straightforward.

‘Why do Catholics worship Mary and the saints?’

He jotted down a short answer which he would flesh out in a minute. ‘We don’t. We worship God and only God. But we ask Mary and the saints to intercede for us with Jesus.

‘Our Lady’s intercession is particularly powerful. The tradition of pleading with the mother of a powerful sovereign began with Solomon, whose subjects applied to Bathsheba, his mother, to intercede with the king on their behalf.’

The next question would take longer to answer: ‘Why do Catholics think they’re right and everyone else is wrong?’ The short answer was ‘They don’t,’ but he’d have to expand on that.

At around 10 p.m., pleased with his responses, he shut down the computer. Sitting in his armchair, he opened the breviary for his night prayers and conducted a daily examination of conscience before retiring to bed.

*Lord, I hope you are as content with today’s events as I am!*

Late the next afternoon Jack called. “Father, I know you’re dying to know how my dinner with Justin went last night.”

“I have a healthy curiosity, yes.”

“Admit it - you can’t wait to find out!”

“I do have other parishioners to worry about besides you and Justin.”

“So you don’t mind if I hang up right now without divulging anything?”

“Did you call to tell me how it went or not?”

Jack laughed. “O.K., O.K.!”

Justin had indeed opened up about his experiences in Iraq and, without giving away anything he’d been told in confidence, Jack could confirm what Father Michael had already surmised.

Having been in Special Forces, Justin wasn’t at liberty to tell his host everything he’d done anyway. But he did reveal losing twenty men who were following his direct orders in Iraq and how responsible he felt for their deaths.

He’d become an efficient killing machine while over there, highly respected among his subordinates and peers for accuracy in picking off ‘targets.’

Trained to lie about his identity and manipulate people in order to obtain information from them, he was so convincing that he no longer knew who the real Justin Chambers was.
He then returned to a society which held his actions in contempt, even though they were necessary to protect the very people who despised him. Their harsh and disapproving reaction had pushed him into extreme isolation: he couldn’t talk to anyone without being judged or having it made clear that they couldn’t care less about his service for their sakes. And they were totally uninterested in his PTSD.

“He mentioned an interesting idea, Father: the concept of a warrior class that does violence on behalf of others, so they don’t have to deal with the troubles associated with that violence and can therefore maintain their innocence.

“He admitted feeling jealous towards those who haven’t had to go through his awful experiences.”

Father Michael was nodding to himself. “That explains why Justin gets so mad at civilians who complain about stress. When you’ve been through what he has, the so-called stresses of our life must seem ridiculously trivial by comparison.

“This is very helpful, Jack, thank you. Seems like you and he get on well.”

“I guess that’s because I’ve also done major things in my life that I regret. Even though they’re not in the same league as Justin’s, I can empathize with his feeling of worthlessness. And you’ll be glad to know that I shared with him the fact that I broke down in tears in your office during my big confession to you. I didn’t want him to feel self-conscious about crying in Isaac’s stall.”

Father Michael was impressed. “Good on you, Jack. I bet that helped.”

“It seemed to.”

“Did he mention wanting to visit Isaac again?”

“Only every other day.”

“That’s wonderful!” The priest hesitated a moment. “And er - there’s something I want you to ask him when he comes next.”

There was an even longer pause at Jack’s end of the conversation. “And what might that be?”

Father Michael told the horse trainer about his hopes that Justin could be persuaded to go into a recognized equine therapy program.

Jack laughed. “I never expected to hear myself say this, but don’t you think he’s doing well as it is? And I bet he’d say that, too.”

“On the face of it, I agree. Yet I suspect this is just the tip of the iceberg. Justin has a whole lot more stuff to work through, and it needs to end with being able to relate to people normally again. As you keep saying, you’re not a therapist.”

“And as you keep saying, Isaac is.”

“You know what I mean, Jack. Therapists are trained to help veterans like Justin take that next step.”

“Like what?”
Jack was being very difficult! Father Michael had no idea what that next step was but was sure there must be one. “All I’m saying is that we need to be careful in assuming Isaac can fix all his problems. He’s definitely been key in opening Justin up, but we’re messing with a man’s mind here, Jack. I think we have to tread carefully and hand him over to people who know how to guide him in the right direction.”

“You do have a point there,” Jack conceded. "It is a bit presumptuous of us to think we can ‘fix’ Justin ourselves."

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say - without discounting the amazing strides he’s already made thanks to you and Isaac.”

“O.K. I’ll broach the subject to him tomorrow when he comes over again. But I can’t promise anything. He’s very attached to that horse.”

Father Michael had a happy thought. “I don’t see why he has to stop visiting Isaac even while he’s in therapy. Perhaps you could make that point if he brings it up?”

“O.K., Father. Wish me luck!”

“You don’t need luck, Jack.”

“I know, I know. God’s on my side.”

“Thanks, Jack, I really appreciate it - and so does God.”
The Harpers were standing in line to talk to Father Michael after the noon Mass on Sunday. The priest hugged Laura and shook hands with her husband and son. “Wanting me to know you’d attended Mass this weekend, Jack?”

“That’s an added bonus, but no. I wanted to let you know that Justin is coming over this afternoon at 3 p.m. if you feel like asking him yourself about - ”

“As tempting as that is, I’ll leave it up to you. I have a lot of other things to attend to today.” He was being truthful: he had to write the answers to the last two questions for that beastly podcast and then go over everything he’d already written. Seeing Jack’s disbelieving scowl he said, “I kid you not, Jack. I have a tough obligation hanging over me that I need to take care of.” He paused. “And anyway, Justin has a much better rapport with you.” He clapped a hand on the horse trainer’s back. “But I’d appreciate a call this evening to let me know how things went.”

At 6 p.m. Father Michael heard from Jack, who’d brought up the subject of formal equine therapy after Justin had spent an hour with Isaac.

“It probably wasn’t the best time to discuss it. He firmly believes that only Isaac can help him. That gelding is his first love, so to speak, and in his mind is irreplaceable.”

“So how did you leave things?”

“Justin said he didn’t want to talk about it now, but would give it some thought and get back to me.”

“Sounds like a possible maybe,” the priest said.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Father,” Jack warned. “It sounded more like an ‘I’ll pretend for both our sakes that I’m not going to say ‘no,’ but we both know I am.’”

Father Michael stifled a sigh. “Well, at least he didn’t go ballistic when you mentioned it. That’s already progress. Thanks for asking him, and let me know if he brings it up again.”

“Like I said, don’t get overly optimistic. Let’s just be glad he’s visiting Isaac and getting some form of help.”

“You’re right,” the priest agreed. “It probably was too early to suggest formal therapy after his talk sessions were such a bust.”

“Either way, I have to say Justin seems milder mannered with each visit,” Jack said, “I only hope he’s like that with his family.”

“I’m bound to hear about it from Simon, one way or the other.”

“Yeah,” the horse trainer agreed. “Fingers crossed he has good news to report.”
“God willing,” the priest said and hung up the phone.

O.K. so Justin wasn’t enamored of the idea at present, but that didn’t mean Father couldn’t start making contact with the nearest equine therapy program. Then things would be in place for the veteran to join one as soon as he agreed.

He now set to work writing the remainder of his podcast replies.

After evening prayers he spent the next hour and a half researching local therapy programs: the closest was about forty minutes away. Justin would have to be pretty motivated to travel that distance, with Isaac living a mere fifteen minutes away.

Nevertheless, the priest shot off an email to Dr. Linda Forbes, PhD, director of H.E.L.P., Horses Easing Life with PTSD, asking if she had time to talk to him about a veteran who might qualify for her program.

Then he opened the fridge he’d been raiding all week. He’d neglected to buy any more food and wasn’t surprised at the meager pickings. He absolutely must get to the grocery store tomorrow! How could he save other souls if he didn’t keep his own body and soul together?

He had one beer left, but couldn’t drink it as he’d given up alcohol for Lent. He poured himself some tap water to accompany the rather eclectic mix of food on his plate: half a tomato, two toasted bread heels smeared with a tiny sliver of butter left in the dish, a celery stalk, one slice of Brie cheese and a small portion of cold slaw.

It was then time for night prayers and bed.

He dreamed he was riding his grey horse, Double Cream in a show jumping competition. The gelding was clearing the fences by over two feet and the cleric, wearing his trademark black soutane, felt as if he were flying towards heaven on Pegasus.

The next morning he awoke with nostalgia for his old horse, now lying in a grave at his parents’ house. Guilt told him he really must visit his father in the nursing home and check on his mother.

He also felt rather hungry, which reminded him to go food shopping today.

After morning prayers he made himself a cup of black coffee - at least he still had that in the apartment - and checked his incoming mail. Linda Forbes, PhD had already responded. She must be an early bird: it was only 6:30 a.m.!

‘Dear Father Shepherd,

‘I was very interested in the case you sent me of a veteran with PTSD who is already being helped by a rescue horse, even though he is not currently following a formal protocol.

‘That bodes well for his future mental and emotional health and he sounds like a suitable candidate for our ten week program.

‘We are partnered with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and your friend would not have to pay anything.

‘You did not say whether he has already indicated a willingness to join our program. I ask this since you mentioned that since conventional talk therapy had not been helpful, he might be averse to therapy of any kind.
'Perhaps I could meet with him where the horse lives? I can come anytime with twenty-four hours' notice.

'I look forward to hearing from you and meeting both you and your friend.

'Sincerely yours,

'Linda Forbes, PhD.'

As the lady had been very gracious in responding so fast, the priest felt pressured to reply in a timely fashion.

But what should he tell her? That he hadn’t got an agreement out of Justin yet? That he may never get one? Would it be unethical to have Dr. Forbes come to Harpers’ Reunion without letting Justin know who she was or why she was there?

He dismissed the thought immediately. Of course it was wrong - it was downright sneaky. Justin would hit the roof when he found out, and then he’d never agree to go into therapy. He might even refuse to come out and see Isaac again just to spite the priest.

No, he had to tell Justin that he’d found a therapy program and its director would like to meet with him to discuss entry into it, if he were willing.

It was only 6:45 a.m. and Father Michael was already feeling under enormous stress. Not only did he have the Justin situation going on - which included his wager with the man - but tomorrow was the day of the dreaded podcast interview. He needed to go through his notes with a fine-toothed comb to ensure his theology was correct and he’d left no loopholes open.

He took a deep breath and did as he always did whenever he got into turmoil. He prayed.

*Lord, help me make good decisions today that will bring honor to You.*

Appealing to his Creator for assistance brought him instant peace.

He wrote a short email to Linda Forbes, PhD thanking her and saying he would get back to her shortly. He would return to the problem after the podcast tomorrow afternoon.

Later that morning he wrote to the therapist again from his office computer, asking her to outline exactly what would be involved in the therapy. His friend would ask the same question and knowing what to expect might make him more open to joining the program.

There were then parish duties to attend to before he could go over his list of podcast answers. Fred Stone had come up with tricky questions, including:

- Why do Catholics believe that it’s really the body and blood of Christ?
- Why do Catholics believe in Purgatory?
- Why aren’t Catholic women allowed to make their own decisions about their bodies?

But Father Michael still welcomed the opportunity to publicize the truth about his faith.

As Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “There are not a hundred people in America who hate the Catholic Church. There are millions of people who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church — which is, of course, quite a different thing.
While the rest of the world celebrated Valentine’s Day, Father Michael was steeling himself for the podcast interview. Shortly before it was to begin, Fred Stone phoned to ask if he was ready?

Father tried to sound convincing. “Absolutely!”

Mr. Stone then explained the technical side of things, and by 5 p.m. the priest was ensconced in his chair in front of his computer screen and connected through Skype.

This he hadn’t expected. The man would be able to see him reading from his notes. Mr. Stone had not been utterly truthful about the nature of this interview and the priest wondered what else might be sprung on him?

It started out amicably enough, with Mr. Stone introducing his guest as Father Michael Shepherd, parish priest of Our Lady of Sorrows Church and a respected member of the Catholic clergy.

The first question asked was the first one on the list Father had been sent: ‘Why do Catholics believe they have to go to church on Sundays?’

The priest responded without looking at his notes. “God made it clear in the Ten Commandments that we are to keep the Sabbath holy.”

“But believers can keep it holy by themselves,” Fred Stone argued. ”They don’t need the trappings of a church.”

It was an objection Father Michael had heard many times. “Sunday represents the day of the Lord’s Resurrection, and is also the day on which we acknowledge his sacrifice for mankind by dying on the cross.

“Only by being present at the Liturgy of the Mass do we participate fully in that sacrifice, by hearing God’s word and receiving Holy Communion.” The priest paused briefly before continuing. “In addition, by going to Mass we show the Lord that He is more important to us than all the distractions of our lives that threaten to take our attention away from our Creator.

“This complies with the first Commandment not to worship false idols. All the material things we chase after quickly become false idols if we don’t take time to spend with the One who gave us life and continues to do so.”

“I guess those are compelling arguments - if you’re Catholic. But what happens if a Catholic skips Mass?”

“Unless there is good reason not to go, such as illness, a Catholic who deliberately misses Mass on Sunday is in a state of mortal sin.”

“Mortal sin? Sounds serious.”
“It most certainly is! As it says in 1855 of the Catechism, mortal sin is a grave violation of God’s law, destroying charity in a man’s heart. By choosing an inferior good to God, he turns away from God, who is his final destination and his supreme happiness.

“It results in separation from God and if we die before repenting of a mortal sin we will lose God for eternity.”

Fred Stone whistled. “That’s heavy stuff, Father! What sins do you consider mortal?”

“A mortal sin is one of grave nature, committed with full knowledge of its gravity and committed freely. Examples are murder, adultery and idolatry.”

“I guess your Catholic confession is where all that stuff gets eradicated?”

“Going to the sacrament of Confession is imperative in order for the soul of someone who has committed a mortal sin to be restored to God’s friendship.”

“So that’s it? Tell the priest you’ve been naughty and you’re off the hook?” The interviewer gave a snort. “Sounds like a picnic to me!”

They were going off script now, but this was Father Michael’s chance to clear up a common misconception about Confession. “It’s not a ‘picnic’ as you put it, at all. Through the sacrament of Confession the penitent’s soul is brought back to friendship with God. But the sins must still be atoned for.”

“I thought confessing sins was atoning?”

“No. It’s just the first step. Let me give you an analogy: if you break your neighbor’s window, you have to say you’re sorry. But that’s not the end of it. Your neighbor will want you to repair his window. That’s atonement.”

“But wasn’t Christ’s death on the cross on the cross atonement for all our sins? You know, once saved always saved?”

“Christ’s death on the cross makes it possible for us to enter heaven. But it doesn’t guarantee entry. We must also be loving and active members of the Body of Christ - that is, His Church. Remember Jesus’ words, ‘If you do not acknowledge Me on earth, I will not acknowledge you in heaven.’”

“So we only have to say that we believe in Christ to be saved?”

“Believing in Christ means a whole lot more than simply uttering the words ‘I believe.’. Even Satan believes in Christ! True belief in Him means obeying His commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself. To be a friend of Jesus is to follow in His footsteps. Remember He said, ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ not, ‘you’re automatically going to heaven because you say you believe in Me.’”

“But no one can be perfect. That’s ridiculous!”

“And exactly because we know we can’t be perfect, we need Christ and His sacraments to help us get up and start again every time we fall. That’s the beauty of Confession - we get a clean slate to work with.”

“But you said we still have to make atonement for our sins. That’s not exactly a clean slate.”
“That is the reason for Purgatory, where we are purified - purged of our sins - before we go to heaven. As it says in Revelation 21:27: ‘For nothing unclean shall enter Heaven.’ You’ve rightly pointed out that nobody is perfect, and we all have to go through that cleansing here on earth before we die or in Purgatory after we die.”

“But the Bible doesn’t mention Purgatory,” Fred Stone said. “That’s just something you Catholics made up.”

Father Michael was in his element. He didn’t need his notes to give Mr. Stone the biblical references to Purgatory. He omitted the references in Maccabees 12: 43-46 about making “atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin” as non-Catholics don’t believe that Maccabees was divinely inspired and don’t include it their Bible.

Instead he said, “I Corinthians 3:11-15 speaks of our works being tested in fire after we die. ‘If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.’ This is a clear indication of a state of purification after we die and before we can enter heaven.”

“That’s pretty deep for my listeners, Father.”

“I suggest they look up Purgatory online in Catholic Answers, Mr. Stone. They’ll find plenty of scriptural evidence for it there.”

“But, again, with all due respect Father, the word Purgatory doesn’t appear anywhere in the Bible.”

“No, you’re right. But neither does the word Trinity. Yet all Christians - not just Catholics - believe in the Triune nature of God, because of the numerous references to His three Persons.”

“That’s very interesting, Father. You make a good case.”

Father Michael smiled. This was going well and his bishop would be pleased.

Then Fred Stone said, “O.K. let’s backtrack to your point about Christ asking us ‘to love your neighbor as yourself.’ Then why are Catholics so intolerant of gay people?”

This wasn’t on the list of questions! He tried not to look bothered by it, but Mr. Stone was clearly trying to trap him into saying something that could be used against the Church. Just as had happened to Pope Francis when he made his now infamous statement “Who am I to judge?”

“Father?” Fred Stone sounded almost belligerent. “Do you have an answer to that?”

“Absolutely!” he replied. “I’m just surprised at your use of the term ‘intolerant.’ What exactly do you mean by that?”

It was important to agree on this.

“You know what I mean. Catholics won’t let same-sex couples get married in their churches, they won’t let same-sex couples adopt children and they won’t allow them to receive Communion. If that’s not being intolerant I don’t know what is!”

“Let me answer that with a question of my own.” Father Michael was adopting a ploy Jesus frequently used with the scribes and Pharisees when they criticized his teachings. “Supposing
you belonged to a group whose core belief is that, in our next life, we all come back as ants. Should your group be forced to abandon this basic belief so that those who don’t believe it can join them?"

Mr. Stone scoffed. “Of course that would be wrong. And why would people who don’t believe in becoming ants even want to join them?

“Ah, I see what you’re doing, Father, but it won’t work. We’re talking here about people who want to be full members of the Catholic Church and be loved by God just as ‘regular’ people are.”

“Gays are loved by God just as much as straight people, Mr. Stone. But God has made it very clear in the Bible that he disapproves of the homosexual act. ‘If a man also lie with mankind, as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be on them.’ (Leviticus 20:13) And again, ‘Even as Sodom and Gomorrrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.’ (Jude 1:7)

“This isn’t the Catholic Church per se being intolerant of homosexual acts - God Himself calls them an abomination.”

“So you’re saying that God is intolerant?”

“Intolerant of sin, yes. But merciful to those who repent of their wrongdoing. Which brings us again to Confession as the means by which we come back into God’s friendship.”

“But you just quoted Sodom and Gomorrrha as examples of ‘suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.’ That doesn’t sound very forgiving to me.”

“Because the people of those cities persisted in their immoral behavior and wouldn’t repent. God can’t be merciful if we don’t throw ourselves on His mercy with a repentant heart and a desire not to do evil anymore.”

“So what I’m hearing, Father, is that the Catholic Church is intolerant of gays, because God is.”

“As I hope I’ve made clear, God and the Catholic Church are intolerant of the homosexual act, in the same way as they deplore murder, adultery and all the other wrongs that people do against God’s commandments. I repeat: God loves the sinner - not the sin. That’s why He constantly gives us the chance to return to Him in the sacrament of Reconciliation, the other word for Confession.

“And if someone has same-sex attraction but leads a chaste life, they are not sinning.”

“So why does God give people same-sex attraction?”

“In some cases it’s genuine same-sex attraction, in others I suspect that our modern society pushes young people to ‘explore their sexuality’ thereby confusing them into sexual ambiguity, rather than emphasizing right and wrong behavior and leading them in the right direction.

“But for those who are genuinely homosexual, it’s a cross that Christ has given them. We all have our crosses to bear and that is theirs.”
“But they’re not allowed to be full members of the Catholic Church if they’re gay.”

“That’s not true at all. As it says in our Catechism, Catholics are called to ‘accept with respect, compassion and sensitivity’ those who labor under same-sex attraction, and to ‘avoid every sign of unjust discrimination.’ Like Christ, we embrace the sinner, but not the sin.

“A gay person who abstains from homosexual behavior is welcome to partake of the Eucharist.”

“But,” Mr. Stone pursued, “same-sex couples can’t get married in the Catholic Church.”

“No. That is against the Church’s core beliefs, so why would they even want to be?”

“Because they want that ‘acceptance’ you were just talking about.”

“They can only be accepted if they accept the Catholic Church’s core beliefs.

“Jesus challenges us to change our lives, not to continue with our damaging behavior. He welcomes us with love, and in return we have to follow Him and obey His commandments. Only then can we call ourselves His friends. Anyone who doesn’t obey His commandments - or even try to - is no friend of His and cannot expect to get into Heaven.”

“Even if they go through that purging process you talked about?”

“They won’t even make it to Purgatory unless they have honestly tried to follow Jesus.”

“You mean they’ll go straight to hell?”

“Your listeners can read the Bible on the topic and decide for themselves.”

“Sounds as if you’re ducking the issue, Father.”

“Not at all. Let me quote Christ, who tells the story of the rich man who ended up in hell, and wanted to warn his brothers so they wouldn’t end up there: “Abraham saith unto him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’” (Luke16:29)

“Through the Scriptures God has written definitively on the issue. The Catholic Church is following His teaching, embracing the sinner and calling him to repentance in order to be saved. Only through humility before God can we hope to be saved, not by trying to force the Catholic Church to change her teachings to please those who don’t want to comply with them.”

“But isn’t the Catholic Church losing members because of her strict teaching?”

“We want to save as many souls as we can, but we cannot force people to accept the truth.

“Christ warned us in Matthew 7:13-14 that the gate into heaven is small and the path narrow that leads to heaven. He also told us that only a few find it. The gate that leads to destruction is wide and the path broad, and many enter through it.

“The Catholic Church believes she stands for God’s truth. People don’t have to accept this: the Church will not impose her beliefs on them. However, she won’t stop believing them simply to suit unbelievers.”

“Then we’re back to the Catholic Church’s intolerance of those who don’t agree with her.”
“Why is it intolerant to have different beliefs from other people? Especially if, as I just said, the Catholic Church doesn’t try to impose them on anyone who doesn’t agree with her?

“Many of your listeners will have different beliefs from me, but I’m not out to persecute them under the law because of it. I would humbly suggest that is the definition of intolerance and reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s persecution of the Jews. It’s very disturbing.”

Mr. Fred Stone laughed. “That’s an exaggeration, Father!”

“Do you really think so? Time will tell.”

“Speaking of which, that’s all we have time for. Thank you for joining me today.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Father Michael switched off the microphone and his computer with a huge sense of relief. This had been every bit as grueling as he had feared. But despite the curve balls thrown at him, he had come out of it well.

The podcast was due to be aired on Friday, and Bishop Thurston should be happy with the result.

The priest could now turn his attention to Justin and texted Jack to find out when the veteran would next be at the farm. Armed with details from Dr. Linda Forbes about what goes on during the therapy sessions, he felt better equipped to persuade the man to join her program.
Chapter Fourteen: Healing a Soul

Wednesday, 15th February

Justin was due at Jack’s farm the next afternoon.

It had become routine to drive over by himself and the priest knew routine was important to many PTSD sufferers. Angela was lending him her car to accommodate these visits. The inconvenience of having to make other arrangements to fetch her daughter home from school was worth the improvement in her brother’s behavior at home.

Now that he wasn’t taking the veteran, the priest needed a good explanation for turning up at Harpers’ Reunion out of the blue. He didn’t want to arouse Justin’s suspicions and was anxious not to land Jack in trouble.

_Lord, I need your help with this!

He repeated this prayer on the way over to the farm.

The day’s dark clouds had vanished, allowing the sun to make its grand appearance in time to produce a lovely winter sunset.

Father Michael drove up to the house, still with no clue how to justify this visit to the veteran. Justin wasn’t yet here which gave him time to think over his strategy.

The two dogs ran over to meet him followed by Robert, whom Father Michael hadn’t seen for a while - except from a distance in the pews with his parents at Sunday Mass.

“Hey, Robert! Good to see you again! How’s my dog?”

“He’s doing great, Father.” With an upturned hand, Robert motioned to the dog to sit. “I’ve taught him some more tricks.”

The priest smiled encouragingly. “I’d like to see them.”

“I need to work on them a bit more before I show you.”

“Just let me know when you’re ready, son.” He changed the topic. “Everything going well at school?”

The teenager shrugged. “Oh, you know, it’s high school, so there’s a ton of work. We’ll be doing our practice SATs soon.”

“Sounds gruesome. Are you guys already talking about which colleges you want to go to?”

“Kinda.”

“You _do_ want to go to college, don’t you?” Father Michael looked intently at him.

“I guess.”

“What’s standing in your way?”

Robert pointed at the black mongrel wagging his white-tipped tail at the priest.
“He'll still be here during vacation times.” Knowing that wouldn’t be enough, he continued, “And you don’t have to be in a dorm after the first year. You could take him with you into shared housing, you know.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But I sure hate to leave him here until then.”

“It just depends on how far away you are and how often you can come back. There are a lot of things to consider when choosing the best college, Robert. Don’t let yourself feel trapped.”

The short teenager bent down and stroked ‘Flex’s head. “I guess I could work something out,” he said.

“That’s the spirit!”

Angela’s car pulled up, a white Ford Focus. As Justin stepped out, Father Michael bent down to make a fuss of the Labrador mix. “It’s good to see you again, old boy! I look forward to seeing those tricks your owner has taught you.” The happy thought entered his head that he could pretend he’d come to see his dog.

*I am paying the animal’s bills, so why shouldn’t I come over to check on him every so often?*

The veteran looked surprised but civilly acknowledged him with a quick wave of the hand before walking straight to the barn. He wasn’t here to chitchat.

Father Michael talked to Robert a while longer, asking more questions about school and wondering what else to say before he could go into the barn and appear not to have known it was Justin’s day with Isaac.

The sudden exit of a horse from the barn cut into his musing.

A large bay with a massive white blaze had got loose from the cross-ties, as one of the ties was still attached to his halter and swinging about his head, panicking the animal.

He took off down the drive, and Father Michael hoped the horse wouldn’t trigger the opening mechanism of the electronic gates.

Jack walked calmly out of the barn building, lead rope in hand, followed by Justin carrying a scoop of feed.

“Don’t chase him,” the horse trainer was saying. “It’ll spook him even more. Luca’s gone into the house to turn off the gates, so he can’t get off the property. We’ll just wander down the drive and wait for him to come to a standstill. He’ll wonder why he’s out here without his buddies and be easy to catch.”

The priest noted the fields were empty as the horses were already in for the night.

The runaway did slow down to a walk when he neared the gate and began grazing the grass on one side of the drive. But a front leg stepped on the tie and when he tried to lift his head, it tugged on his halter and applied sudden pressure to his poll.

Eyes rolling in terror, he pulled back even more. The quick release latch was underneath his hoof, not attached to the halter, where it should have been, so it didn’t come away when he yanked on it.
Though shorter of stride than Jack, Justin was trained in stealth and moved with impressive speed down the drive, arriving at the end well ahead of Jack and Father Michael.

Both dogs wanted to give chase and Robert was holding them by the collar next to the fountain.

Remembering Jack’s instructions with Isaac, Justin slowed down and approached the horse’s shoulder. He stopped within twenty feet and said in a low voice, “Hey, buddy, let me get you out of this mess.”

Jack and the pastor watched the veteran walk with calm assertion to the animal's left side.

“It’s O.K. I’m here to help,” Justin said gently. He placed the scoop of feed on the ground and slowly stood back up to scratch his withers. The horse was still trembling but his eyes became more placid and Justin continued the motion until the animal relaxed his head ever so slightly.

In a matter-of-fact manner the veteran squatted down to unclip the tie from the halter. The horse kept his head low even after Justin had released him.

Justin waved the feed scoop under the horse’s nose. “You’re free now, buddy. Try some of this.”

The horse shifted his front leg and Justin picked the cross-tie off the ground.

Watching the animal go from terror to greed in less than a second, the two onlookers nodded to each other. Justin had come a long way.

God is always making good come out of bad, the priest thought.

Jack came up to Justin and held out the lead rope. “Will you do the honors?”

Justin grinned. “Sure thing!” He attached the rope to the halter just as the horse was finishing the feed and handed Jack the tie. “How come this thing got stuck on his halter? Shouldn’t it have come off or something?”

“It would have come off, if it had been attached to the wall ring the way it’s supposed to be.” Jack picked up the feed scoop. “Someone put the wrong end on the horse and I need to make sure it never happens again.”

That ‘someone’ was Joe, who stood sheepishly by the barn entrance waiting for the three men when they returned with the horse.

“Son, what have I told you about making sure those ties are on the wall so the breakaway part attaches to the halter? A horse could do some real damage to his eye with that clasp swinging around his head if he gets loose. We’re lucky this guy didn’t hurt himself. How would I explain that to the owner?”

“Sorry, Dad. I wasn't thinking when I put them back on the wall rings.”

“Why were they even off the wash stall walls?”

“Robert and I were using them as temporary leashes for the dogs.”

“Use the regular lead ropes in future, will you? Even better, use their proper leashes.”

“Yessir,” Joe replied.
“And how about thanking Justin here for saving your butt?”

Justin handed the horse over to the teenager with a kind smile. “It could happen to anyone, Joe. Glad to help.”

“Thank you, Mr. Justin. Sorry, Dad.”

“Well, no harm was done and a lesson was learned. Tack him up for me, would you, please? I still need to ride him this evening.” Jack fastened the tie which the horse had run away with onto the wall ring, then reversed the tie on the other side.

The contrite boy led the big bay into the wash stall and turned him around to face the aisle. He placed the lead rope over the horse’s muscled neck and the animal stood still as Joe attached the ties to his halter - the correct way round.

While Joe fetched the horse’s tack, Father Michael kept the animal company so he wouldn’t be tempted to run off again.

The teenager lifted the saddle onto the bay’s back, and the priest asked, “What made him spook and run?”

“A mouse ran behind him into the wash stall and the barn cat came out of nowhere, chasing it.”

“Good old Tigger! Did he catch the mouse?”

“I don’t know. Everything was a blur after Dusty took off.”

“Well, I’ll leave you in peace to get him ready, son.” The priest turned to go.

“Hey, Father, before you do, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, son, what is it?”

Joe took a second to speak. “There’s this girl in my class - actually, you know her. Her name is Alice Weinstock, and Mr. Justin is her uncle.”

Father Michael showed an interested silence.

“She just loves horses, Father, and she wants riding lessons.”

“Sounds great to me. So what’s the problem?”

“It’s not a problem exactly… Well, yeah, it is. Do you think Dad would let me be the one to give her lessons? Do you think I’m ready?”

The priest knew it wasn’t his place to answer that. “Don’t you think you should be asking your father instead of me?”

“It’s just that, well, would it be weird for me to give Alice lessons when her uncle already comes here to visit Isaac for - you know, um, therapy?”

“It would only be weird if they were both here at the same time. I don’t see a problem if they come over on different days.”

Joe’s expression became hopeful. “So you think I’m ready to give riding lessons?”
“Like I said, Joe, that’s not for me to decide. Although I’m sure you’d make a great instructor. And don’t forget, Alice’s father has to agree to it, too.”

“Thank you, Father! I’ll talk to Dad about it.”

“Happy to help.” The priest patted Joe on the shoulder.

This discussion with Joe made it clear to him that the sooner Justin went into formal therapy the better. The kid was right, it would be awkward if the niece were to take riding lessons while her uncle was hanging out with a horse.

He walked past Isaac’s stall on his way back to the tack room, but the stall was empty. Where could they have got to?

Feeling the cold, he decided to get some coffee first, then inquire as to Justin’s whereabouts. Jack was in the tack room warming himself with a mug in his hands.

He gave the priest a big grin. “Hey, Father! Getting a bit chilly?”

“Too right! I need coffee - now!” He poured some into one of the assorted ceramic mugs sitting on the draining board by the basin and took a sip. “That’s better! By the way, Justin isn’t in Isaac’s stall - and neither is Isaac. What’s up?”

“Our veteran has graduated from sitting in there with him to leading him around the indoor arena.”

This was a surprise! “What brought that on?”

“Justin’s been wanting to interact more with Isaac for a while now, so I suggested it,” Jack explained. “He’s done it a few times already and it’s good for the horse, too. He needs to be handled more and eventually I guess I need to find out if he’s rideable.”

“Has the rescue asked you to train him while he’s here?”

“Not in so many words, but the lady who brought him - who is also the director of the rescue - said she hoped ‘he’d become adoptable in a very short space of time’ as she put it. From which I inferred that she has high hopes of my molding him into an easy horse to home while he’s here.”

Father Michael laughed. “So no pressure then?”

“None at all!”

“Justin’s display of horsemanship just now certainly proves he’s capable of doing more with Isaac, doesn’t it?”

Jack nodded. “Yup! That man really connects with him.”

“Mind if I go watch him in there?”

“I don’t mind, but he might. How about waiting until I take our runaway horse in there to ride? Then it’ll look as if you’re admiring me, not him.”

“Your ego knows no bounds, Jack Harper!”
“And your nosiness knows no bounds, Father Michael Shepherd!”

Joe put his head around the tack room door. “Dusty’s ready, Dad.”

“Thanks, Joe. Go back to the house and get warm. Father, your moment to snoop has arrived!”

Dusty was standing quietly in the ties, half-asleep and looking nothing like the horse that had taken off down the drive. A thick blanket was draped over his back against the cold.

Father Michael said, “By the way, I protest strongly against your use of the word ‘snoop,’ Jack. All I’m trying to do - all I ever try to do - is save souls.”

Jack gave an impish grin as he stroked the large blaze on Dusty’s face and took the halter off his bridle. “Whatever you say, Father.” He peeled the blanket back from the saddle and tightened the girth one hole on either side. Replacing the blanket he pulled the reins over the horse’s head and led him out of the wash stall.

“C’mon. Let’s see how Justin and Isaac are doing!”

Father Michael followed the man and horse. But neither of them was prepared for the sight awaiting them in the arena.

Jack handed Dusty’s reins to Father Michael, not wanting to startle Justin and Isaac by the sudden appearance of both man and horse. He walked slowly towards the entrance doors and as he peered quietly over them, his expression changed from gentle inquiry to quiet amazement.

He retreated backwards, making sure Justin hadn’t seen him, before turning round and walking back to the priest.

“What is it?” Father Michael whispered.

Jack took Dusty from him. “You need to see this, Father. Go have a look, but be very quiet.”

Intrigued, the priest approached cautiously and peeked over the half-doors.

In the middle of the arena lay Isaac, looking dead. His head was stretched out as were his four legs, but under the blanket Father Michael could see the animal’s belly rising rhythmically in a clear indication that he was still breathing.

His head was resting in Justin’s lap. The veteran was sitting on the sand with his legs crossed at the ankles, stroking the gelding’s forehead.

Justin was talking to the horse in hushed tones, so Father Michael couldn’t hear individual words. But he could see that the veteran’s eyes were moist and his expression was indescribably sorrowful.

If it hadn’t been a complete violation of privacy, the priest would have loved to take a video of the two and replay this beautiful scene over and over again.

He backed away and returned to Jack. In a hoarse whisper, tempered by emotion, he said, “Unbelievable! Who’d have thought?”
“I know. I’ll put Dusty away. The last thing I want to do is intrude on their moment. Did you see how Justin was talking to Isaac? Still think he needs to go into formal therapy?”

The priest accompanied Jack and the bay horse down the aisle to the animal’s stall, where the trainer untacked him.

“You’ve got an unscheduled day off, boy. Enjoy it!” He turned to Father Michael. “I’ll have to make this day up soon. I am getting paid to train Dusty.”

“But it is for a fantastic cause, isn’t it?” The priest was grinning broadly.

“No question there!”

“I have the strong feeling that those two are healing each other.”

“Yes. I don’t think Justin will want to go into therapy elsewhere,” Jack said. “And I’m not sure it’s a good idea to suggest it again.”

“I have to agree. It does look as if Justin’s healing is inextricably tied to Isaac. At this point he would probably refuse to handle another horse.” The priest added, “Did you mention to him about still being able to come and see Isaac while undergoing therapy elsewhere?”

“Yes, but it didn’t persuade him.” Brushing down the horse, Jack asked, “Why are you so determined he enter a program, Father? He seems to be making enormous progress right here.”

The priest laughed. “Listen to you! Is this the same man who didn’t want to take on a veteran with PTSD because he’s not a trained therapist?”

“Are you saying you wish you hadn’t brought him here?” Jack countered slyly.

“No. But what I am saying is that this was supposed to be a first step to see if Justin could even bear to be around a horse, before introducing him to a licensed equine therapy program.”

The trainer was using a soft-bristled brush on Dusty’s face and the horse yawned as he released tension. “And now you’re upset that your idea has been such a success?”

Jack was goading him and the priest knew it, but it did look like a case of ‘be careful what you wish for.’ His gut told him that Justin’s healing shouldn’t stop here, but how was he going to convince the veteran of that if he couldn’t even convince Jack, who wasn’t emotionally involved?

This interchange told him that he needed very persuasive arguments indeed.

“I know this won’t carry any weight with Justin,” he said, “but once again I have to say that we’re taking a man’s well-being into our hands with no idea of how to do it. That’s getting into the dangerous waters of playing God and stroking our egos, Jack.”

“Don’t worry, Father. I agree with you. But when you witness a scene like that - " he nodded towards the arena " - it’s very hard to imagine tearing Justin away from Isaac or even telling him he also has to form a bond with another horse.”

“That’s why we’ll have to emphasize the fact that he can come here whenever he wants, if that’s alright with you.”
“Father, that’s absolutely fine with me.” Jack bent down to pick out the gelding’s hooves, and the animal automatically raised each leg when touched, making the job easier. “And I do have an argument to back up the plan to get Justin into therapy soon.”

“Tell me more!” This sounded hopeful.

“We’re both forgetting that Isaac is a rescue horse looking for a new forever home. My farm is only a temporary stopover place for him. Someone is going to want to adopt him, then Justin won’t be able to see him anymore.

“So the sooner he’s in a therapy program and gets close to a horse which isn’t under the threat of being moved elsewhere, the better.”

“That’s a great point, Jack. It would be awful if Justin were to lose Isaac with no backup equine for emotional support!”

“But we can’t exactly say to him ‘Hey, Isaac could be adopted out at any moment, so you’d better go into another program right now’ can we?”

“Heavens, no!” The priest shuddered at the thought. “Then we’d be back to square one.”

Jack was about to carry the bay’s saddle and bridle back to the tack room when the two men heard a noise in the arena.

“Sounds like Isaac is getting up,” Jack said. “Look busy! I don’t want Justin to think we’ve been spying on him.”

“Then give me something to carry.”

Father Michael was handed the horse’s brushing boots and they both walked to the tack room. When they’d put away their respective items Jack suggested yet another coffee.

The priest looked at his watch. “I’d love to but I’d better be going - and I need time to think of my approach with Justin.”

As he exited the barn, he turned up the collar of his black coat against the biting wind and made his way back to the Toyota. He had a great deal to think about! That intimate moment between Isaac and Justin, which he’d been privileged to behold, had moved him more than he cared to admit. He had watched a broken man and a broken horse mend each other.

_Dear Lord! Please show me the way to build on their relationship and heal Justin completely._

He’s almost reached his vehicle when Justin’s voice called out, “Father Michael, do you have a moment?”

Hiding his concern over what the veteran might want, the priest turned and waved. “Sure!” He closed the car door and walked back to the barn.

“Let’s go into the tack room,” Justin said. “It’s a lot warmer in there.”

“And I can get another cup of hot coffee,” the cleric replied with a grin.

They were soon ensconced in two of the ancient armchairs. The aroma of coffee in the mugs that they cradled in their hands mingled with smells of saddle soap and leather.
Tigger, the orange tabby barn cat, was purring loudly from his perch on the back of the priest’s seat, rubbing a feline head on the man’s coat collar. Father turned to scratch the animal under the chin, glad of an excuse not to look directly at the veteran. “So how can I help you?” He still didn’t feel comfortable adding the familiar ‘son’ which he used with all the other male parishioners younger than himself.

“Jack was just telling me more about the research you’ve done on equine therapy for veterans like me who have PTSD.”

Thrilled that Justin was willing to broach the subject again, the priest mustered as calm a voice as he could. “Yes, that’s actually what gave me the idea to bring you to his farm. I wanted to see if you liked horses.”

“With a view to my going into equine therapy if I turned out not to be too scared of them?”

“Something like that, yes.” Suddenly the priest became worried. Was the veteran about to have a meltdown over being manipulated like this? Was it safe for him to be alone with the man?

He glanced at the door, checking the location of his exit if he needed to escape in a hurry.

“Don’t look so anxious, Father. I know you’re only trying to help me. And you’ve succeeded. I would never have thought a horse could do so much to bring me out of myself, but Isaac has worked wonders.

“The reason I’m asking about equine therapy is because I was wondering if I could join a program - not as a patient, or whatever you call them - but as a helper.”

“You mean, as someone with PTSD who can relate to the veterans who come into the program?” Purring loudly, Tigger now climbed down into the priest’s lap. Ginger hairs were shedding onto his black coat, but the pastor stroked the happy cat anyway.

Justin continued. “Exactly. I think they’d be a lot more inclined to open up to me than to someone who, however well meaning, hasn’t been through the same experiences. I could serve as a living example of someone who was helped by a horse.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea!”

“Good. So is there a place not too far away? Maybe you could get in touch with their head honcho and introduce my idea to him?”

“I’ve already been in contact with the local program,” Father Michael ventured to admit. “I could arrange for you to meet the lady who runs it. Her name is Dr. Linda Forbes, but she’s not a medical doctor. Maybe have her come here? What do you think?”

“That would work. Then she could talk to you and Jack as witnesses to the ‘progress’ I’ve made.” He drew quotation marks around the word ‘progress.’

The priest picked up on that. “Don’t you call it making progress?”

“I prefer to think of it as healing.”

“That’s exactly what it is. But since it’s an ongoing process, you could think of it as making progress in your healing.”
Justin laughed, out of character for him. “Pure semantics, Father, but I’ll take it.” He took a few sips of his coffee and said, not looking at the priest, “And now I guess you’d like to know what was going on in that arena just now.”

“It’s none of my business,” the cleric replied truthfully.

“Maybe not. But the great thing about spending time with Isaac is that he makes me want to open up about stuff. And who better to open up to than a priest?”

“I’m deeply flattered, Justin.”

“Well, you are the reason I came here.”

The priest nodded with a smile, inwardly rejoicing at this change in the man.

“I was leading Isaac around the arena,” Justin began, “like I’ve been doing a few times now. But today I sensed he was tired and when I led him across the middle, I felt him slow down, so I stopped.

“Something prompted me to take off his lead rope and I just stood there stroking his neck and feeling him breathe. I leaned against him lightly and began to breathe with him in the same rhythm. You should try it - it’s very calming.

“Then his front legs buckled underneath him. I jumped back - I had no idea what was going on. When he lay down flat and stretched all four legs out I thought he was having a heart attack or something and I was getting ready to call Jack. Then I realized he was settling down for a snooze.

“I’ve never seen a horse lie down before. He looked so peaceful! So I just sat by his head and something inside me said it was O.K. to put it in my lap. His head is really heavy, but he was happy to co-operate and lifted it just enough for me to place it on my legs.

“Soon he was asleep for real. I could almost hear him snoring.

“Then something inside me snapped. Isaac suddenly represented the soldiers under my command whom I’d led to their deaths. This large body somehow became all of them rolled into one, sleeping the sleep of the dead.

“I began to cry - Isaac has had that effect on me a lot - and I cried for all my brothers in arms whose deaths I’d caused. I cried for all those men who went with me to Iraq but didn’t make it back.

“It was the first time I’d truly confronted that anguish, Father. I’ve been running away from it for a very long time and hadn’t appreciated how exhausting it is to hold it in. That skinny little horse, sleeping so peacefully with his head in my lap, allowed me to tell those soldiers how sorry I am and how I wish I could bring them to life and give them back to their grieving families.” He gave an embarrassed cough. “I could swear that little guy understands what I’m telling him - even in his sleep.”

Father Michael felt compelled to say, “There’s a very special kind of communication flowing between the two of you.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel I’m not imagining things that I want to be true.”
Father shook his head vehemently. “Not at all. Jack has commented the same thing.”

Justin sat back and looked the priest squarely in the eyes. “Still feel I need to go into formal therapy?”

Father Michael Shepherd, whose mission on this earth was to save souls, very much wanted to say ‘Not formal equine therapy, but spiritual therapy - through praying to God, Who created Isaac.’ But it was too soon. He had to stop thinking about the wager: this was about the long term health of Justin’s soul, not winning a bet by Easter.

So he simply said, “I'm not sure what it could do for you that hasn’t already been accomplished.” Hopefully that still left the door open for therapy later on if needed.

“Me neither, Father. And now I’m confident that I can share my experiences with other veterans who have PTSD. We’ve all come to this condition via different paths, and no two stories are the same. But what I would have in common with them is the feeling of alienation and self-loathing, as well as the trust issue.

“As the saying goes, ‘misery loves company’ and I think I could add to the help a horse can give by being empathetic. The horse would put them in a better place emotionally, then they’d be more ready to talk to someone who’s suffered what they’re going through. More so than someone with a PhD who hasn’t been there. I mean no offense to people with doctorates: your lady will know way more than me about the psychological stuff.” He paused and shrugged. “Anyway, I’d like to take a shot at it.”

“That sounds very reasonable to me. I’ll give her a call and see what I can set up.”

“Thank you, Father.” Justin gave the priest an unexpected smile.
Despite the nest of cat hairs on his coat, Father Michael was much cheered by his visit.

It compensated for the fact that the heater in his old Toyota had packed up on the way over to Harpers’ Reunion. Yet another repair the old car needed. He must get it into the garage soon - this weather was too cold to be driving in with no warmth.

Justin’s progress was encouraging, yet the best indicator of it would be how he treated his family. The priest was tempted to phone Simon and find out, but didn’t want Justin to feel spied on: better to let the information come naturally.

He also thought about his bet - that he could get the veteran to come to Easter Mass this year.

That was in six short weeks and there was no sign of headway on that front. It was going to take a miracle for Justin to believe that the same God, Who’d allowed so many bad things to happen to the veteran, was also his Merciful Creator.

Meanwhile, the podcast he’d interviewed for was due to be released on Friday. Mr. Stone had explained that the time lapse was because the original tape needed to be checked through for sound quality and any necessary editing.

Now that the misery of going through the whole procedure was over, Father Michael looked forward to his bishop’s congratulations on a job well done.

This happy anticipation kept him going through the long confessions on Wednesday after evening Mass.

As they were now in the Lenten season, many parishioners came to confess what a hard time they were having keeping their resolutions.

And with Easter fast approaching, many Catholics who had been away from the sacraments for a long time - in some cases, decades - were finding the courage to come into the little confessional room and unburden themselves of sins that had weighed them down for so long.

He thought about Freud’s quip about how only Jews came to visit the famous psychologist. The Catholics had Confession.

Yes, Our Lord knew what He was doing when he gave the Apostles the mandate to forgive or retain sins two millennia ago. Look what happened when he told the paralyzed man and other crippled people, ‘your sins are forgiven.’ Their infirmities were immediately healed.

The power of a clean slate before God - a new beginning - was not appreciated by those who’d never experienced a good confession!

Many men and women broke down in tears. They felt the wonderful release of admitting to what they’d done and experienced the incredible power of knowing they were forgiven by God, after walking in fear of Him for so long. Of course, the paradox of all this is that God already knows everything: to pretend we can hide our thoughts and actions from Him is futile. Adam and Eve
tried it in the Garden of Eden and failed, in a classic example of human pride getting in the way. Pride was the root of so many of our problems!

But Father Michael understood. For even he found it hard to go to confession, despite knowing the benefits - as well as the necessity - of going.

Once he told his confessor that he may as well bring in a tape recording of the sins he’d recited last time. It was always the same old list and he didn’t feel he was moving forwards in holiness.

To which the priest had said: “Would you rather add more sins to your list?”

He was also told his problem wasn’t unique: we all have ongoing issues to address. “The important thing, Father, is that you continue to work on them and not give up. Christianity is about getting up every time we fall, it’s not about not falling.”

Father Michael had taken heart at this.

The final penitent left, leaving the priest with a few free moments to sit before the Exposed Blessed Sacrament.

Sitting in a pew, he thanked God for that last man, who’d not been to Confession for thirty years. As always, when the priest helped such a soul find peace and come back to Christ, he was overcome by humility that Jesus should have chosen him to stand in persona Christi and absolve the sins of this lapsed Catholic. The man had been carrying them around for a long time, unable to receive the Body of Christ in Holy Mass.

*Lord, this has been an incredible day! Thank you!* 

His euphoria carried over into Friday and the excitement of hearing the podcast was becoming almost unbearable.

Fred Stone had told him it would first be available around noon. As soon as he’d said his midday prayers, Father Michael put on his headphones and plugged them into his cell phone.

He typed “Stone’s Throw” in the search window of his podcast app and eagerly downloaded the episode entitled: “The Truth about the Catholic Church.” He thought the title rather dramatic, but was aware that such theatrics attracted more listeners.

Oh, well, if it helped bring more souls into union with God…

The beginning of the podcast was just as he remembered: chatting about why Catholics are bound to go to Mass on Sundays, what mortal sin is, explaining the rite of Confession and citing the biblical references to Purgatory.

Then Fred Stone was saying: “Let’s backtrack to your point about Christ asking us ‘to love your neighbor as yourself.’ If that applies to Catholics - which I think you agree it does - why are Catholics so intolerant of gay people?”

But the response was not what the priest remembered: “God Himself calls them an abomination.”

He hadn’t said that at all!

But there was more.
“So what I’m hearing, Father is that the Catholic Church is intolerant of gays, because God is.”

*What!*?

It got worse.

“You mean they’ll go straight to hell?” Fred Stone was saying.

“The Catholic Church believes she stands for God’s truth,” Father Michael’s voice clearly stated.

Fred Stone had stripped out everything about God loving the sinner and not the sin. Father Michael had never said that God is intolerant of gays! Where was what he’d said about God forgiving the repentant sinner?

He yanked off the headphones and slumped forward on his desk. This was awful! He’d been thoroughly duped by Mr. Stone and the repercussions of this were going to be horrible.

It wasn’t above an hour before Bishop Thurston called. His reproval was short and sharp. “What on earth were you thinking, Father? You have done irreparable harm with your outrageous claims!”

“If I might say something, Your Excellency - “

“It had better be good!”

“Mr. Stone lifted sentences out of their context and pasted them together to suit his purposes. If I’d known what he intended to do, I would never have agreed to take part in the interview.”

This whole debacle would never have happened if he’d stuck to his guns about not talking to Fred Stone.

There was a long and uncomfortable silence on the other end before the bishop said, “I want to believe that, Father.”

“Your Excellency, forgive me for asking, but do you truly think that I would say the things that Fred Stone makes me appear to have said? Many people in my parish are struggling with same sex attraction and I’ve made great strides helping them deal with it and feel included in the church. Why would I suddenly betray them?”

“Well, that’s exactly it, Father. I’m getting a lot of heated emails and phone calls from your parishioners feeling that you’ve done just that and were simply posing as their friend and confidant.”

“What can I do to show them that it’s not true?”

“I was going to ask you the same question. Do you have your own tape of the interview?”

“No. It never occurred to me that I’d need to.”

“We’re both at fault, Father. I should have insisted you do that. I wonder if we could get the original recording back from Mr. Stone?”

“I think that’s a bit hopeful. But I can at least ask him for it.”

“Do that, and we’ll see if he has the decency to do so.”
“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“And Father?”

“Yes?”

“I have to say you were right when you didn’t want to do this interview. You had more insight into this Fred Stone than I did.”

It was relief to Father Michael to be given the benefit of the doubt, but he’d need to come up with proof if that benefit were going to last.

“It’s good of you to say so, Your Excellency.”

“Let’s pray hard for a swift resolution to this unfortunate situation.”
Sure enough, attendance at Mass was poor that weekend. Word had got around that the priest was a homophobe and not to be trusted as a shepherd of the Catholic Church.

He contemplated the dwindled numbers in the pews, with a mixture of gratitude to those who still trusted him as their pastor and grief that so many should have been duped into believing he was not the man of mercy he’d always purported to be.

He lifted up continual prayers to God to raise him out of this mess.

After ten attempts to draft one that sounded civil, he’d sent an email to Fred Stone. Under the circumstances politeness was more than the man deserved, but Christ said to love one’s enemies and do good to those who hate you. Now was the time to put that into practice and prove he was willing to do the right thing even when it was extremely difficult.

Whether his parishioners would ever believe in his innocence was something he didn’t like to speculate on. The important thing was that God see His servant continuing to be the person he’d been ordained to be.

Now that he was going through his own unjust suffering at the hands of a third party, Father Michael better understood how hard it must have been for Our Lord to allow the misguided Jews of His day to put Him through torture. All He had to do was ask His Father to let the cup pass from His lips. Then He wouldn’t have had to endure the agony of being flogged within an inch of His life, before being ridiculed as He carried His Cross through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha, to die the excruciating death of crucifixion.

All he was dealing with was the embarrassment of being suddenly unpopular.

The thought occurred that maybe he was being humbled for the sin of pride. He’d been feeling so pleased with himself in that interview that he’d forgotten he was supposed to be doing it for the glory of God.

Now he was paying for his smugness.

At least the Harper family was at Mass, he was glad to note, and Robert’s family, and Simon with his wife and daughter. There were still some people he could count on.

Jack and Laura shook his hand after the service. There was no long line, and Jack asked, “What gives, Father? Is there a major football game on or something?”

“You must be one of a handful of families who don’t know what’s happened.”

“What are you talking about?”

Father Michael told them.

“That’s appalling!” Laura said. “There’s got to be something you can do.”
“I’ve emailed the man to see if he’ll be decent enough to recant his version of the interview, or at least let me have a copy of the original. I should have insisted on that as a condition of doing the thing at all.”

Jack shook his head. “Hindsight is a wonderful thing, isn’t it, Father? Who would have thought that someone would stoop so low?”

“The worst part of it is that all the counseling I’ve done for the group whom this man is misleading has now gone out of the window.”

“Father, all I can say is that God makes good things come out of evil for those who love Him, and He’ll definitely do that for you.”

“He also causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust,” Father Michael sighed. “But you’re right, Jack. It’s refreshing to have a layman quote the Bible back at me.”

“See? I do listen sometimes!”

Father Michael grinned and Laura touched his sleeve. “Father, would you care to join us for lunch?”

“Come riding again!” Joe added.

“You’re all very kind. Normally I’d jump at the chance, but there is a task I need to do this afternoon which I’ve been neglecting. However, don’t let that stop you asking me again!”

With a lump in his throat, he watched the trio walk through the parking lot to Jack’s Evoque. He could really have used their company today!

But when God humbles, He doesn’t expect us to feel sorry for ourselves. He wants us to get up from the dust and show through our actions that we care for our neighbor.

And what better way to forget his own troubles than to console someone whose sufferings were far greater?

It was time to visit his father.

He changed out of his vestments and withdrew to the tiny apartment for a quick bite from his now well-stocked fridge.

Putting on a heavy charcoal-grey sweater and his long black coat against the cold, he drove down in his car-with-no-heater to Charlottesville, Virginia. His father resided at Peaceful Lakes Nursing Home on the town’s outskirts.

The modern brick building was painted a cheerful yellow. Spring was round the corner and the large lobby was seasonally decorated with plastic tulips set in a vase on the coffee table. Stuffed toy rabbits lurked coily on the armchairs and sofa surrounding a gas fireplace. On either side of the hearth nestled a flock of chenille Easter chicks.

To the left of the lobby an older lady sat behind a desk sporting the visitors’ log-in book. A plethora of pens, each adorned with a bright cloth flower, stood in a glass container.

“Good afternoon, Father. Come to see your dad?” she said in an upbeat voice.
Father Michael smiled. “Yes.”

He scanned the visitors’ log to see if his father had had any other guests. He was pleased to note that a Sister Teresa was coming every Sunday from the local Catholic Church to give his father Communion. And, as always, his mother had been in every day since her husband’s arrival in this facility.

He was glad to take over that task today and give her some time off. When he’d phoned to let her know about this trip he promised to come by and say ‘hello’ before driving home.

“Ready?” the lady asked.

Father Michael nodded and she accompanied him to the door connecting the lobby to the main building, punched a six-digit code into a pad on the wall and opened the door slightly.

With a ‘Thank you’ he pushed it wider and walked into the land of the living dead.

His nose wrinkled at the sudden stench of urine emanating from the diapers worn by forty or so residents. You weren’t allowed to call them ‘patients’ - and he thought of them more as inmates.

A hallway extended on both sides, and he assumed Mr. Shepherd Sr. would be among those being loudly cajoled into ‘doing their exercises’ in the activity area along the corridor to the right.

He made his way down, weaving between old men and women shuffling along in various stages of undress and awareness. One skeletal woman wandered aimlessly towards him, eyes downcast and looking lost. Father Michael wondered how on earth she was still clinging to life. Was she properly prepared for death? She couldn’t have much longer to wait.

As he was worrying about her soul, another lady propelled her wheelchair towards him with her feet, arms pushing against the walls for extra power.

In the middle of the corridor stood a bulky man who looked too young to be in here. A clear case of early onset Alzheimer’s. He began to pull down his trousers and was spotted by a staff member who yelled, “No, Jeremy!” and rushed over to him. Too late - Jeremy’s pants were already around his ankles, exposing a well-soaked diaper.

He grinned like a child as the male nurse gently chided him and pulled his trousers back up. “Time to change you, Jeremy. Come on.” He took the forty-something by the hand, and Jeremy meekly followed.

Father Michael said a prayer for both men and continued on to the activity room. He noticed the framed photos on the walls - a coral reef, a group of dancers and a wreath of flowers, all arranged in the shape of a heart.

He passed the residents’ rooms, each with a glass-paned box attached to the wall by the door. They contained memorabilia: photographs from their youth, family portraits, medals from their service in World War II as soldiers and airmen, naval personnel or nurses. How different their lives were now!

The hallway opened onto a large space where a coordinator was attempting to rouse the seated participants out of their stupor to raise their arms, lift their legs one at a time and rotate their ankles. She tried hard to sound positive in this sad and slothful environment.
“Come on, Joanna, you can do it!” she cried. “Give me a smile, Miss Juliet! That’s the way, Erwin!”

Father automatically offered prayers for this determined leader and her senile charges.

A man kept getting up and roaming from one chair to another, annoying their occupants.

“Sit down, please, George, thank you.” The exercise lady took the bewildered George’s hand and led him firmly back to his seat. Two minutes later, he was up again.

Determined to escape, another male resident pulled on the handle of the door to the enclosed garden and set off the alarm. Another challenge for the coordinator.

A female resident turned to her neighbor and said something mean which made her cry.

Father shook his head. What a sorrowful place! If only his father didn’t have to be here. But his left side was paralyzed after the stroke which brought on the dementia and Vera Shepherd could not lift her husband onto the toilet seat. He kept trying to get out of his wheelchair, and after several falls he’d had to come here. Guilt and loneliness brought his mother on her daily visits.

“Go away!” shouted a lady resident from her chair across the hall in the dining area. She was facing the wall and yelling at no one in particular. A nurse walked over to ask what the matter was, and the woman screamed “Go away, leave me alone!”

“Time for your medication,” the nurse said, wheeling a metal trolley over and placing several pills into a small plastic cup. She poured some water into a second plastic cup. “You’ll feel a lot better after you’ve had these.”

“You’re trying to poison me!” The old lady pushed the cups away, spilling the water and medication onto the floor.

The nurse grabbed her intercom and called for assistance.

Father felt as sorry for the personnel as he did for the inmates (let’s face it, that’s what they were).

A wife sat next to her wheelchair-bound husband, trying to coax him into action by joining in herself. The pastor could imagine his mother doing the same for her husband.

He watched as this drama of deep desperation unfolded before him. Every day was the same. These people were stuck here and would not leave alive - and it was no different for his father. What a depressing thought!

But it did put his own problems into perspective.

He looked for an available staff member to ask the whereabouts of his father, who was not among the ‘exercisers.’ Finally he caught the eye of a familiar male nurse whose name tag read ‘Patrick.’

“Looking for your dad, Father?”

“Yes, Patrick. I don’t see him out here.”
“I’m afraid he didn’t want to leave his room this morning, so we took him breakfast and lunch in bed.”

This was not a good sign. It smacked of giving up.

He was led into Mr. Shepherd’s small bedroom. Propped up on thick pillows, his father immediately said, “Tim, how good to see you!” The thin version of the former gentleman farmer raised a bony arm in greeting.

His son was grateful his father recognized him. But how long would that last?

Behind Father a quiet voice said, “I’ll leave you two in peace.”

“Thank you, Patrick.”

The male nurse closed the door and Father Michael had the sensation of being shut in a prison cell.

No longer sure how to relate to his father, he began by sitting on the bed. “They say you didn’t want to get up this morning, Dad. Why’s that?”

“I’m tired.” The old man closed his eyes again.

“Didn’t you sleep well?”

“No, not yet. They’ve only just put me to bed.”

“Dad, it’s early afternoon. You’ve been in bed since last night.”

Mr. Shepherd’s eyelids fluttered open. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Well, you look like a priest, so I guess you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“I am a priest, Dad. And I wouldn’t lie to you anyway.”

His father smiled wanly. “That’s good to know. When’s breakfast?”

“You’ve had breakfast, Dad. And lunch.”

“Have I? When?” The man looked baffled.

“Earlier this morning and a couple of hours ago. Are you hungry?”

“No.”

This was hard! How different from their earlier years, when Mr. Shepherd senior tried to persuade his errant son to go to church instead of thinking only about making money.

He wracked his brain for something to talk about. “Did you see Mom yesterday?”

“Mom? Oh, she hasn’t been to visit me since I came here, son. I don’t know why. What have I done wrong? Do you know? Can you tell me? I really would like to know. Then I could tell her that I’m sorry and maybe she’d come and see me.”

“Dad, Mom was here yesterday. She comes every day.”
“Does she? Well, you look like a priest, so I guess you wouldn’t lie to me. But I wish she would come and visit me.” Mr. Shepherd placed an emaciated hand on his son’s knee. “Be a good boy and tell her I miss her, will you?”

It was useless to argue with the dementia sufferer. “I will and I’m sure she’ll come in tomorrow to see you. She loves you, Dad.”

Tears started dribbling from his father’s eyes. “And I love her, son. When can I go home?”

Never, Dad.

“Soon, Dad.” Home to the Lord. “Would you like to say a prayer with me?”

“I don’t know any prayers, son.”

Of course you do, Dad! You taught me my prayers, how can you say that?

“Perhaps you remember the Our Father?”

“Why don’t you start it for me and I’ll see if I do?”

“O.K.” Father Michael made the Sign of the Cross over himself and his father copied him. “Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”

Mr. Shepherd interrupted him. “Tim, what does ‘hallowed’ mean?”

“It means ‘holy’ or ‘blessed,’ Dad.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Father Michael was heartened to see Mr. Shepherd mouthing the words along with him as he recalled them. He must ask his mother to repeat this prayer and the Hail Mary with him on her visits.

He stayed through the 4 o’clock dinner, persuading his father to get up and join the others in the dining room. During the meal a visitor came in with a dog, and Mr. Shepherd visibly perked up. The owner was happy to let him pet the yellow Labrador and the animal laid his head on the old man’s knees for a while. It was the first time Father Michael had seen his father look content in a long while. Perhaps he should bring ‘Flex on his next visit? With Robert’s permission, of course.

Before driving home he visited with his mother for an hour.

His time at the nursing home had been difficult, and he wasn’t sure that he cheered Mrs. Shepherd up much with his report of how her husband was doing. But he made the effort and, as he was fond of saying, ‘only God gives us as an A for effort.’ Our sincere attempts to do the right thing are what counts - the results of that effort are not always under our control.

His mother was happy to see him. Drawing her arm through his, he walked with her down to the barn to visit the two old horses still on the property and paused for a while by the grave of his beloved equine companion, Double Cream.
This jogged his memory about having recently been riding and gave him something to talk to his mom about. It brought a smile to her face.

When it was time to go she held his hand in hers and patted it gently. “Don’t be a stranger, Father Michael.”

“I’ll be back soon, Mom. I love you.” He was well aware that her calling him ‘Father Michael’ meant he shouldn’t forget he was also her son.

He drove off feeling guilty that he was able to go back to the comfort of his apartment at Our Lady of Sorrows, leaving his mother lonely and his father being cared for by strangers. All the way back he prayed for the residents of Peaceful Lakes, for God to prepare them for a good death and take them straight to Heaven with Him.

Once home he checked his cell phone. Mr. Stone had responded to his email but the priest didn’t read it immediately.

It was late and he was hungry, so instead he pulled a packet of frozen peas from the fridge, placed the bag upside down on a plate per the instructions and put it in the microwave to cook for 5½ minutes on high.

Then he took out a pre-roasted chicken and a container of ready-made mashed potatoes. He cut a few slices off the bird and arranged them on a plate with the potatoes to microwave once the peas were done.

He’d procrastinated as long as he could, and now said a quick prayer before opening the email.

‘Dear Father,

‘Your agreement to do an interview with me did not rest on any conditions. I therefore consider myself free to do whatsoever I choose with the material you provided me.

‘I am sorry if this is not what you expected, but I’m sure you will understand that I am within my rights.

‘Fred Stone.’

The priest was sorely tempted to write back quoting Scripture passages outlining what happens to the wicked, but it would be futile. The man was out to laugh at the Church - an easy thing to do these days without impunity - and would treat the sacred lines as the ramblings of a crazy old man.

It was so disheartening! He had only been obeying his superior when he agreed to this interview.

There must be a way to make things right.

Lord, let me find the path to lead my parishioners to the Truth. So many of them are hurting because of my perceived betrayal!

Having left it to God to show him what to do next, Father Michael once again turned to helping someone else in order to take his mind off his own troubles.
He emailed Dr. Linda Forbes to put in that good word for Justin, as he had promised. He outlined how much farther Justin had come in his healing than when he last wrote, adding:

‘He feels strongly about the ability of horses to help veterans with PTSD and would like to become a volunteer in your program.

‘Are you still willing to meet him at the farm where he’s been spending time with Isaac? You’d see firsthand the relationship Justin has developed with the horse and how open he now is to talking about his condition.

‘God bless,

‘Father Michael.’

He pressed ‘Send.’ Lord, please use me to make this a success for Justin!

Afterwards he microwaved the plate of chicken and mashed potatoes, together with the heated peas which were growing cold.

Five minutes later he was sitting at his small dining table with his hearty meal in front of him and a glass of water in keeping with his Lenten resolution.

His cell phone pinged, announcing a new email. It was from Dr. Linda Forbes and he eagerly opened it.

‘Dear Father Michael,

‘I was happy to receive your great news about Justin’s continued healing through the horse Isaac. It is a testimony to the amazing capacity of these animals to help PTSD sufferers where we humans are unable to break through its barriers.

‘I would love to meet with both at Mr. Harper’s farm.

‘Please suggest a time and give me the directions and I will be there!

‘Yours sincerely,

‘Linda Forbes, PhD.’
Chapter Seventeen: Justin & Dr. Forbes, PhD
Tuesday, 21st February

Dr. Forbes agreed to come that Tuesday, Justin’s regular visiting day.

She arrived shortly after Father Michael, and as he shook hands with the attractive brunette she told him she was eager to meet the veteran who’d undergone equine therapy without the help of a psychologist.

She pulled her woolen red hat farther over her ears and drew a matching scarf closer around her neck. “I’d soon be out of a job if all veterans with PTSD discovered how to heal themselves!” she quipped, plunging white-gloved hands into the pockets of her long camel hair coat to keep them warm.

Older than Laura and a shade taller, Dr. Forbes was not your normal blue stocking with a doctorate. Instead she was a happy person, probably because of her constant contact with horses.

Father Michael was quick to say, “I don’t think Justin has completely ‘healed himself.’ There’s no doubt he’s a lot better than he was, but I suspect he has a longer road ahead of him than he realizes.” He put on his gloves. “And I have no idea whether he’s easier to live with now or is still the same - er, prickly person.”

Dr. Forbes laughed. “That has to be the kindest description of a PTSD sufferer I’ve ever heard, Father! Living with the demons he handles daily, it’s not surprising he finds it hard to integrate into ‘normal’ society.”

“I do hope you can help him.”

“I’m not sure I’ll do as well as Isaac,” she replied with a grin. “I must admit, this is the first time I’ve felt competition from a horse!”

“I’m sure you’ll do a fine job,” Father said. “Here he comes.”

Justin was circling the fountain in Angela’s white Chevy Cruze and parked by the priest’s sedan.

As soon as the veteran walked over to them, Father Michael knew this was going to be a success - in some form or another. For it was immediately evident that Justin wanted to make a good impression on the lady.

Whether it was because his future in helping fellow veterans depended on his being polite to the good looking Dr. Forbes, or for some other reason, he couldn’t tell.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” he said. The muscled man was digging into his long-unused trove of social graces and Father Michael could have sworn that Justin reddened slightly as the priest introduced the two of them.

Mine not to reason why, he thought.

“I’m really looking forward to meeting Isaac,” Dr. Forbes said. “He sounds like a miracle worker.”

Justin looked uneasy. “He’s only a scrawny little guy, not one of your fancy horses.”
“I imagine that’s exactly why he’s been so helpful, don’t you?”
“Yes, ma’am, I guess it is.”

Father Michael sensed the war weary man beginning to think this lady knew her stuff, despite not having suffered his ordeals - and being a woman.

The priest pointed towards the barn. “Shall we?”

They walked to Isaac’s stall, but it was empty.

Before Justin had time to become anxious, Jack appeared with two halters. “Hi there! Isaac and his friend are the last ones to come in.” He handed a halter to Justin and smiled at the therapist. “Is someone going to introduce us?”

Once the niceties were over, Justin said to Dr. Forbes, “I’ll go and bring Isaac in.”

“Can I come and watch?” she asked.

Father Michael saw brief panic on the man’s face as if he feared this was some kind of test.

Dr. Forbes understood. “I’m simply curious to see Isaac. I don’t have to come out with you - I’m just as happy to wait here.”

“No, you’re welcome to join us. If you’re not going to be too cold?”

“If you knew how many layers of clothing I have on, you wouldn’t worry about that!”

Justin gave an uncomfortable smile at this comment and walked out with Jack.

Lagging behind a little with Father Michael, Dr. Forbes asked, “Does his think he’s under some kind of scrutiny?”

“Absolutely! This is a pass or fail situation for him. He feels that if he can’t prove he has a good relationship with Isaac, you’re going to dismiss his claims that the horse has helped him and reject his request to let him help the other veterans at your center.”

The therapist shook her head sadly. “He’s put a heavy burden on himself. But then, being used to carrying responsibility he automatically takes on that role.”

The priest replied, “That sounds like a fair assessment.”

“Then I need to put him at ease. Let’s go see this magic horse.”

“I do warn you, Justin wasn’t lying when he said Isaac’s a scrappy little thing.”

Dr. Forbes smiled. “What matters is what’s inside, doesn’t it?”

The priest nodded and together they walked out of the far end of the barn towards the paddocks.

But before they caught up with the two men, she touched his arm. “Let’s just wait here and give Justin some space.”

Father was happy to comply.
Jack and Justin were standing by the two adjacent paddocks. The left one was Isaac’s and the right contained the little chestnut.

Pastor and therapist watched the two men chatting outside the gates. Isaac had been grazing at some distance but when he spotted Justin he trotted over with a whinny of recognition and put his head over the gate.

Justin stroked the gelding’s head and Jack gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. The veteran laughed: he was being kidded because of the horse’s attachment to him and clearly didn’t mind.

“Jack really relates well to him,” Father Michael said.

“It can’t hurt that he owns the horse that Justin is so fond of.”

“Isaac is actually a rescue Jack’s fostering.”

Dr. Forbes gave a low whistle. “Looking at the state of him, I can see why he needed rescuing. Even with that blanket on, I can tell he’s pretty thin.”

“You should have seen him when he first arrived.”

The lady smiled. “Then it makes sense that Justin should have bonded with him so strongly.”

“Yes. Isaac is a reflection of himself.”

“You’d make a good therapist, Father.”

“Thank you. We do actually train as counselors as part of our vocation. But I wouldn’t like to deal exclusively with PTSD sufferers the way you do. I think I would become too sad. Justin’s situation is enough for me to empathize with for now.”

“But in the same way you must get excited when you bring a soul to God, I’m thrilled each time I see a veteran begin to trust other people again and make positive life goals. We both do the same thing.”

“In a way, yes.”

Justin and Jack were leading the two horses out of the paddocks towards the barn and stopped next to Father Michael and his companion.

“Meet Isaac,” Justin said.

Dr. Forbes touched the gelding’s face. “He has the most amazing eyes. It would be easy to get lost in them.”

The veteran beamed proudly. “Now you see why he’s such a powerful healer.”

“Do I ever!”

“What about my horse?” Jack wailed.

“Your horse is too healthy to be of use to anyone,” the psychologist joked.

Justin pushed past the trainer with a victorious grin.
“Don’t listen to them,” Jack told his chestnut.

Justin led Isaac to his stall and took off his turnout blanket. The hair was growing back over the cuts on his ribby body, but they were still very evident.

Dr. Forbes gave another low whistle. “What’s his story?”

Justin explained while grooming him and putting on a heavy indoor blanket. The therapist picked up the horse’s feed bucket from outside his stall, but hid it from the horse until Justin had answered her next question. “Is he ready for his supper?”

“Sure! Thanks.” He took the feed from her and poured it into the corner trough. Isaac eagerly thrust his nose into it.

“I guess he takes advantage of every meal he’s offered!”

Justin stroked the gelding’s neck. “He probably is never sure whether he’ll get another one.” With obvious reluctance he said, “Well, I guess we should leave him to eat in peace.”

Dr. Forbes glanced at Father Michael with a smile. He really loves this horse, doesn’t he?

The priest nodded at her unspoken thought.

Justin came out of Isaac’s stall. “Shall we go into the tack room and get some hot coffee?”

He feels very comfortable here, thought Father Michael.

Jack was already pouring coffee into four mugs when Isaac’s three visitors came in.

“Milk and sugar?” he asked Dr. Forbes.

“Just some milk, please.”

Jack brought out a little jug from the fridge, put some milk in her mug and handed it to her.

Father Michael and Justin stood expecting the same question, but Jack said, “Neither of you is an attractive visitor. I’ve already poured your coffee and that’s your lot.”

“You’re just jealous that I have the better horse,” Justin said. He took the remaining two mugs off the kitchen counter and handed one to Father Michael, who noted how the former Justin would have grabbed his own coffee without considering anyone else.

Seated in the worn and overstuffed armchairs, the four adults chatted for a while about Jack’s horse training background and the number of clients’ animals he had in the barn at present. The conversation then turned to Dr. Forbes and how she had come to her present calling.

She told how her father had been in the Vietnam War before PTSD was a recognized condition. As a child, she had watched him struggle with his symptoms, and when he took his own life, she’d vowed to do everything she could to prevent it happening to other war veterans.

It was said with optimism, not self-pity. “It’s a great thing to have a purpose in life and be able to help other people.” She looked at Justin. “Speaking of which, do you know what’s involved in the kind of equine therapy I do?”

“I’ve done some research online, but I’d like you to explain it to me.”
Father Michael felt uncomfortable. Shouldn’t the veteran and the therapist be talking about this very personal topic in private? “Jack and I can leave you to discuss this, if you’d prefer.”

“I have a ton of things I should be doing,” Jack added helpfully.

“I appreciate your sensitivity, guys, but stick around,” Justin said.

“In that case,” Jack said, “We’ll need more coffee.” He got up to prepare a new pot as Dr. Forbes began her explanation.

“Before I get into my program,” said Dr. Forbes, “do you mind telling me about the first time you met Isaac and how that experience affected you?” Justin looked a little sheepish. “You don’t have to, but it might stop me repeating things you already know.”

“I haven’t really thought about it. It sort of happened, and I haven’t analyzed it.” He hesitated a moment and looked at the floor. “That might destroy the magic.”

Father Michael realized the therapist was ‘doing her thing’ by asking the veteran to verbalize his experiences with the horse. He also knew it wasn’t entirely true that Justin hadn’t analyzed his reactions to the animal. Hadn’t the soldier told him that in cradling Isaac’s head he was tending to his fellow brothers in combat who had died - some of them as a result of his own actions?

But Justin might not want to tell everybody about that - not just yet.

Dr. Forbes caught Justin’s cue to back off. “No problem. So here’s how our program operates.

“I start out with a group of four to six veterans and a camaraderie forms very quickly among them. They discover that however isolated their condition makes them feel, they are far from being alone and simply knowing that already helps them.

“They are each introduced to a horse and taught how to groom him. For many of them this is the first time they’ve been near one. This is all done under supervision - I have several people helping me - but we prefer to stand back and let the soldiers bond with their horses without our interference.”

“Yup. All we need is time alone with our horse.” Justin motioned his head towards Jack. “My friend over there left me to it.”

Dr. Forbes smiled at Jack. “Good instincts.”

“Pure luck,” he replied.

Father grinned, knowing how badly Jack didn’t want to be considered a therapist.

Dr. Forbes continued. “Some veterans grab that brush and start grooming too vigorously. I watch as they notice the horse pin his ears back or swish his tail. Some of them figure out why, others ask me and I tell them it’s from feeling ‘attacked.’ They immediately feel bad and slow down their brush strokes and check to see whether the horse is enjoying it. They become more concerned about the horse’s feelings than their own.

“It’s wonderful to see the transformation in these men and women in just one session. They respond to the way a horse accepts them as they are in that moment - no judgement about their past, no expectations - just ‘be nice to me and I’ll be nice to you.’”
Justin said quietly, “It is an incredible connection. Isaac let me simply be myself. He allowed me into his space without my having to talk to him. That was such a relief! I was alone with someone who was good company, but didn’t require anything from me. He had no agenda. I could trust that what I saw was reality - no faking. The horse was comfortable with me despite my horrible past. He didn’t mind when I sat in the corner of his stall, while he munched on his hay, sometimes turning to look at me with those brown eyes.

“Suddenly I felt incredibly loved by a living being - unconditionally loved, not because of anything I’d done or could do for him. I was overwhelmed by a sense of peace that I hadn’t felt since going to Iraq.” He looked up, embarrassed. “And yes, it made me cry. I know you all heard me in there.”

“Hey! Don’t forget that Father Michael made me cry, too,” Jack said.

Justin smiled slightly.

But Dr. Forbes was excited. “Yes! That’s exactly what happens! Many of the veterans put their arms around the horse, feeling that acceptance, and yes, a lot of them cry. I just walk away and let them.

“And if they want to ride, we teach them how to saddle up the horse, lead it out to the arena and mount up. Then we give them a lesson.

“It’s good to see them concentrate so hard on their horse that they forget everything else. Have you ridden Isaac?”

“He’s too skinny. I think I’d be too heavy for him, and anyway, there’s that swollen knee of his. I’m having a great time with him without doing that.”

“You’re welcome to ride another horse, if you like, Justin. I never thought to offer,” Jack said.

“It hadn’t occurred to me, either. Thanks, but I’m in no hurry.”

Dr. Forbes continued. “I don’t think you need to ride him to get the full benefit of being around him. Many of our vets don’t want to ride. They’re happy to spend time on the ground with their horse.

“Either way, once they’ve spent around 40 minutes or so with the horse, we get together and chat about the experience. A lot of vets dislike the sound of that, but no one is forced to do it.

“However, we do find that when one person opens up about what their horse has done for them, the others are keen to share their experiences as well. That’s when the camaraderie kicks in big-time. No one who comes into the program leaves on that first day without a significantly improved outlook on life. And they all look forward to coming back - we’ve not lost a client yet.”

“This is a proven method of giving them back their interest in life and becoming more like the people they were before their deployment. And that makes their families happy, too. Equine therapy works faster and better than traditional talk therapy.” She turned to Justin. “How does that sound to you?”

“Do you mean as a prospective client or as a volunteer?”
“Both. If you’ll allow me, I’d like to do a psychological evaluation on you to see where you are in your recovery, how much assistance you may still need, and how soon you could come to us as a volunteer.”

“So you think I might be a good candidate for your program - I mean as a helper?”

“Most definitely! We already have a couple of volunteer vets who’ve overcome PTSD and the more we have, the more convincing we’ll be to our clients that this really does work. You would be another great ambassador for us.”

Father Michael wished he could hear more. But he needed to get back to his parish and Jack needed to return to work, so the two of them took their leave and left the therapist and the veteran to themselves.

The horse trainer walked the priest to his car. “I think that was a success, don’t you? Justin seems to get on pretty well with the doctor.”

“I’m pleasantly surprised, especially since his first shot at therapy was such a bust. But she had him with that comment about Isaac’s eyes. He was putty in her hands after that!”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, I have the feeling a good relationship will evolve out of this.”

“I agree. And it’s all thanks to you for letting him come and visit Isaac.”

“Please go home now before you start telling me again how happy I am when I’m helping humans.”

“If the shoe fits...” The cleric opened his car door and got in.

Jack shut the driver’s door firmly shut. “Good bye, Father!”

With an exaggerated grin the priest fired up the old Toyota’s engine and his sense of having accomplished God’s work kept him in a good mood all the way home despite the lack of heating.

The answering machine was blinking at him, but thankfully it was a message from Jack and not the bishop or that Mr. Stone.

“Father, I forgot to ask you something. Do you mind calling me, please?”

He dialed Jack’s cell.

“I wanted to talk to you about that podcast. Has there been any resolution to the problem?”

“I appreciate your asking, but sadly no. The man refuses to give me a copy of the recording, because I didn’t make that a condition of my interviewing him. He claims he’s within his rights to do whatever he wants with the material.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Since I don’t have a copy of what I said, it’s a case of his word against mine. And with the prevailing sentiment against the Catholic Church, we can guess whose version of the truth will be accepted.”
Jack whistled and said, “Wow, that’s rough. I’m sorry he’s being such a jerk about it. I wish there were something I could do to help.”

“The one thing you can do is pray for me. I’m in need of all the prayers I can get!”

“I’ll put you on my list.”

Father Michael trusted Jack would do it. “Thank you, and keep me posted on what happens with Justin.”

“Will do. Have a good evening, Father.”

“God bless you, Jack. Good bye.”

The priest let out a sigh - something he was doing a lot these days. He said his evening prayers then prepared a modest supper for himself. He’d almost finished when his cell phone rang.  

*Please don’t let it be the bishop!*

“Father, do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Simon, what is it?”

“I have to tell you what a difference there is in Justin. He came home in an amazingly good mood tonight. He’s already been more relaxed since he started going over to Jack’s place and is much nicer to everyone, but something must have happened today because he’s now being *sociable*. He joined in our discussion at dinner tonight and even asked Alice how her day had gone.

“You and I both know that’s not Justin. Do you know what’s caused this change? And do you think it’s a permanent thing?”

Father Michael laughed. “That’s wonderful! Yes, there is a reason for it.”

He told his brother-in-law about Dr. Forbes and her chat with Justin, pointing out that the lady therapist was not bad-looking, either.

“That explains it!” Simon said. "He hasn’t mentioned her. Nothing like wanting to impress a woman to make us men behave!"

“I think she’s going to be in the picture for a long time to come,” the priest assured him. “I hope they made an appointment to get together soon.”

“He did mention something about a trip out to another farm. Would that be this Dr. Forbes’ base of operations?”

“Yes. That will be where he’ll volunteer if he gets accepted.”

“Father, you’ve worked wonders. I can’t thank you enough!”

“Thank the Lord, Simon. I’m just his humble servant.”

“Well, thank you God for your humble servant! Good night, Father.”
The priest was very happy about Simon’s news. Yet his work for the Lord would not be complete until he got Justin’s rear end in the seat of his pews by Easter. He wasn’t ungrateful for the progress made so far, but was he bringing the veteran back to God?

He didn’t think so.
Chapter Eighteen: The Empty Confessional
Wednesday, 21st February

Father Michael said Mass the following morning as usual and was sad to see that even his group of daily attenders, who normally numbered thirty or so, was still down by two-thirds because of that “Stone’s Throw” podcast.

How hard it was for him to leave the situation in God’s hands! It was easier to tell everyone else to trust in Him in times of distress than to walk the walk when his own back was against the wall. This was a test of his own faith. If he didn’t pass it he would, indeed, be the unworthy pastor so many of his ex-parishioners considered him.

_Thy will be done!_ he repeated throughout the day and in the confessional after Mass when no one came. He used the time to say his prayers, determined to wait a full thirty minutes before leaving his post in case a stray penitent should come in at the last moment. Although, why would they, if they hadn’t bothered to come to Mass?

But a voice told him to stay put. Assuming it was a prompting from the Holy Spirit, he obeyed.

Half an hour elapsed and he was about to remove the stole from around his neck when he heard familiar footsteps and Jack walked into the confessional.

Father Michael extended his arm in greeting. “Hello! Good to see you! Take a pew.”

“Thank you, Father.” Jack sat opposite his confessor and began. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one month since my last confession.”

As Jack admitted to his continuing frustration with Laura’s work schedule and his disappointment at how little time they were spending together at present, the priest had to stop himself from smiling.

“ Aren’t you two about to go on your real honeymoon?” he asked.

“Yes, and I can’t wait! I just hope we haven’t forgotten why we got together in the first place by then!”

“If you’re worried about that, I expect Laura is, too. Be careful to leave any resentment behind when you go. Remember that she is working hard to bring money into the family so that you’re not supporting Joe and her by yourself.”

“I suppose I’m jealous of her job because it takes her away from me.”

“But after the first week of April won’t she go back to working normal hours?”

“Yes.”

“That’s great! You two will reconnect during your trip and have time for each other after you return home.”

“Suppose Laura doesn’t like spending so much time with me?”
“Suppose you let God handle that? He didn't bring you two together just to have things fall apart. Be patient with her, Jack, and be there for her when she's done with her crazy work schedule. Remember, she already feels the pressure of her new job. Don't make her resent you by adding more pressure from home.” He smiled benevolently. “Anything else?”

“I almost lost my temper with a client this week.”

“Why?”

“He refused to listen to anything I was telling him about his horse’s training when he came to pick it up. ‘I’m assuming you’ve sorted him out, Jack. That's what I’ve paid you for,’” the horse trainer mimicked. “I didn’t punch the guy, but I can assure you the thought crossed my mind!”

“The important thing is that you kept your temper under control despite your harmful thoughts.

“For your penance, I’d like you to thank God for Laura and ask Him to help you feel optimistic about your relationship. Offer up one decade of the Rosary for her.”

Jack nodded with a rueful smile as the priest absolved him of his sins and made the Sign of the Cross over him. Jack crossed himself at the same time.

As a parting thought Father Michael added, “Jack, don’t be so hard on yourself or Laura. Marriage is a journey, and you’ll have good times and hard times. Just keep loving her and asking God’s help when things get tough.”

“Thank you, Father. I will.”

When Jack didn’t immediately rise to leave, he asked, “How are things going otherwise?”

“Busy. Joe twisted my arm into letting him give Simon’s daughter riding lessons. Seems her uncle has got her interested in horses. I wasn't sure it was a good idea for a teenager to teach a teenager, but I’ve watched him a few times and I have to say, the kid has a talent for it.”

“I like that. It’s turning Justin’s situation around and making it a family enterprise.”

“The only thing is, Joe and Alice hang out a lot after lessons and I think Robert is feeling left out.”

The priest frowned. “Poor Robert, that’s rough. I hope Joe doesn’t forget what he owes his friend.”

“I’m working on him, believe me.”

“Good luck!”

Jack exited the little room.

The priest removed his stole and walked out of the church into his office to spend a day catching up on several duties that he had neglected in the course of helping Justin.

His secretary had opened the mail. On top of a miscellany of papers was a letter from Bishop Thurston noting that attendance at Sunday Mass was down significantly and asking the parish priest to explain what steps he was taking to undo the damage done by that podcast?
Stifling for the millionth time the anger welling within him at the fact that his obedience to his superior had brought about this situation, he quickly prayed, *Thy will be done!* adding, *But please find a way to get me out of this situation!*

Not knowing how to reply to the bishop he decided to give it a day. He tried to occupy his mind with other administrative matters: the people enrolled in RCIA who were coming into the Catholic Church on Easter Sunday, and whose number he hoped wouldn’t dwindle because of this podcast fiasco: visits to the sick of the parish to arrange: the agenda for tomorrow evening’s meeting of the St. Vincent de Paul society and - if she didn’t cancel because of that podcast - another appointment for spiritual direction with Mrs. Davis, the lady whose daughter had died.

Being a Wednesday, he said Mass again at 7 p.m.

Robert and his mother sat in the scantily filled pews. It was unusual to see them during the week but he was glad of their friendly faces.

He told them as much when he shook their hands afterwards and Robert said, “I wanted to come to confession, Father.”

“No, it won’t. I’m shorter than most boys my age and no girl’s going to like me.”

“Then I’ll see you shortly.” The priest went into the sacristy to take off his Mass garments and fetch his stole.

Robert was waiting alone by the confessional door when he returned. Father Michael turned on the white noise machine outside and went into the small room. He kissed his stole and draped it round his neck before beckoning Robert to come in.

The teenager sat opposite Father Michael in the chair which Jack had occupied a few hours earlier and began, “Bless me, Father for I have sinned. It is six weeks since my last confession. I think.” He looked up, flustered at his lack of precision.

The priest said encouragingly, “That’s a good enough estimation, Robert. Go on.”

“I can’t help it, but I’m really jealous of Joe. He’s giving lessons to Simon’s daughter, Alice, and I’m being left out now. It feels like he’s betrayed me.”

Father Michael told Robert that they were both reaching the age when girls would be of more interest to them than they used to be, and not to be too mad with Joe. “Your time will come, too, young man.”

“No, it won’t. I’m shorter than most boys my age and no girl’s going to like me.”

“There’s someone for everyone, Robert.”

“There’s someone for everyone, Robert.”

“Then what about you, Father?”

“I’m married to God. I chose a different path from most young men.”

“Does that mean I have to become a priest if no one will marry me?” Robert asked.

“No, it doesn’t.” Father Michael stifled a smile. “Becoming a priest is a choice, not a last resort. And you’re not priest material, I can assure you. You’ll find the right girl. Just let God take care of it. Now for your penance …”
Full of empathy for the sad teenager, when Father Michael left the confessional he prayed for Robert on his knees in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Luckily, enough parishioners had signed up to spend time with Our Lord, exposed in the Monstrance until 11:00 that night, and he thanked God heartily for them.

It also meant that he could go back to his tiny apartment for supper before reposing the Eucharist and turning in for the night.

He was clearing away the dishes from his meal when Simon called. It was 9 p.m. What was up?

“I’m sorry to bother you with this, Father, but Justin heard this afternoon that someone wants to adopt Isaac. I wanted to wait until tomorrow to tell you, but he’s distraught - and threatening to turn back into what he was.”

The priest quickly replied, “Let me call Jack and see what can be done,”

“Thank you!”

Father immediately phoned the horse trainer. “I hear Isaac is soon to have a new owner. Is that right?”

“Yes, Father, it is.”

“I just had a call from Simon. Justin is extremely upset.”

“I thought he should know as soon as the rescue told me they’d found someone to adopt him.”

“But Jack, you know how crucial that horse is to Justin’s recovery. Couldn’t you keep him?” The request was unreasonable but the priest wouldn’t let the horse go without a fight.

“I don’t own the horse, so I can’t make decisions about him. The rescue is insisting that he go to the new owner. Adopting out the horses is their mission, after all.”

“Can’t you give him a forever home?,” the priest pleaded again. “Think about it, Jack! You’re used to paying his bills, so what’s the problem?”

“No, the rescue pays his bills. I just provide somewhere for him to live and see to his daily needs. I really have no say, Father, and I can’t afford to take on a horse that doesn’t pay for itself. Here is someone wanting to take on the responsibility and it would be foolish not to let him go. It was always supposed to be a temporary solution.”

“You’re right, of course. I’m sorry to put you in an awkward situation. Take care.”

“I’m sorry, too, Father. I really feel for Justin, but my hands are tied.”

Yet the priest wasn’t going to give in that easily. There had to be something he could do.

It was late, but he knew Dr. Linda Forbes worked all hours and he dialed her number.

Sure enough, she picked up the phone immediately.

“Could you please meet me at Jack Harper’s place tomorrow morning?”

“Why? What’s up?”

“I have a situation with Justin and I need your help.”
“O.K. What time?”
“10 a.m.?”
“I’ll be there.”

With a heartfelt ‘Thank you!’ the priest signed off then texted Jack, who was hopefully not yet in bed.

Meeting Dr. Linda Forbes at your place tomorrow at 10 a.m. Hope that’s O.K.

Jack’s reply came back: No idea what you have up your sleeve, but that’s fine.

Thanks! It doesn’t involve you, so don’t worry! the priest wrote back.

That’ll be a first. Good night!

Good night, Jack!
Father Michael arrived at Harpers' Reunion fifteen minutes early.

Jack waved in greeting from the back of a horse he was riding in the outdoor arena and the warmly wrapped priest sat on the bleachers watching him and offering up another prayer for the success of his mission.

Dr. Forbes’ dark grey Dodge Durango came through the electronic gates at the end of the drive.

Jack was finishing his session on the horse and rode up to Father Michael. “I hope you meant what you said about my not being involved in whatever it is you’re up to. I have a gazillion horses to get through today.”

“I am a Catholic priest and therefore a man of my word,” Father Michael said grandiosely, with his hand over his heart.

“Then why do you have to meet here?”

“Because it will add more emotional weight to my arguments with the good doctor.”

Her SUV was now circling the horse fountain. Jack said, “I wish you luck, Father!”

“I don’t need luck. I have God on my side.”

“Of course you do. You know you sound like a broken record, don’t you?” Jack said it with a grin.

“What’s wrong with repeating the truth?”

“You’ve got me there. I’m off now. Don’t have a loud fight with her on my property. I don’t want to have to come and break you two up.”

“Why don’t you just go and ride your gazillion horses?”

Jack laughed and touched the rim of his riding helmet. “Yessir!” He rode out of the ring and said “Good morning!” to the therapist, who was approaching the bleachers.

Father rose from his bench. “Thank you so much for coming, Dr. Forbes. I’m very grateful to you.”

She looked puzzled. “I came because I’m intrigued to know what this is all about.” She added, “What’s going on?”

The priest stretched out his arm behind her in a gentle herding gesture. “Come with me for a moment.”

Dr. Forbes accompanied him to Isaac’s pasture. The horse was no longer wearing a blanket. The weather was warm today and he had also filled out a bit. His ribs still showed, but his overall appearance was greatly improved and he had a happier demeanor.
He looked up with mild interest at the two humans leaning on the gate but quickly turned his attention back to the serious business of grazing.

“What's up?” Dr. Forbes asked again.

“Isaac is about to go to a new home. Someone wants to adopt him.”

“But that's wonderful!”

“Not for Justin it isn't.”

“Oh, I see what you mean.”

“This horse has single-handedly - or single-hoofedly, I guess you could say - turned the man from a sullen, isolated and deeply unhappy person into a sociable human being with a good future ahead of him.”

“That is quite an accomplishment for one horse, isn't it?” Dr. Forbes said. “Now you understand why I went into equine therapy.”

“Yes, it is and yes, I do. And that's why I want you to adopt Isaac. But you have to do it quickly before the other person signs the adoption papers.”

“Excuse me?”

“Dr. Forbes, this horse is crucial to Justin's recovery. If he leaves, then all the work he's accomplished will be reversed and that man will go into such a deep depression there'll be no pulling him out of it.

“If you truly believe in helping veterans like him, you'll take a chance on Isaac.”

“But Father, he probably can't be ridden. You heard me - most veterans like to ride, and my job is to help most veterans.”

“But Justin will also be a valuable asset to you if he joins your program as another volunteer who’s been there, done that and can empathize with your clients.”

“You're saying he won't come on board if Isaac's not in the picture?”

“Not only that, he'll have lost his purpose in life. Is that what you really want for him?”

“But that knee of his probably can't take the strain of being ridden.”

“You don't know that for sure. And anyway, does it really matter? You've seen what he's done for Justin. Imagine how much he can help others like him! And they'll relate deeply to the fact that he's unrideable because of injuries sustained in the line of duty. He didn't choose to race and overflex his knee, you know.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

Father wanted to press his point further, but an inner voice told him to pray quietly instead.

*Lord, this is Justin's only hope!*
While they were talking, Angela's white sedan raced up the driveway and parked with a flourish of dirt. Justin leaped out and rushed to Isaac's field. "Hi, buddy!" Ignoring the therapist and the priest, he opened the gate and strode over to the horse.

The thin grey recognized him and trotted over. The burly man hugged the horse's neck and buried his face in white hairs while the animal stood patiently in silent understanding.

Father Michael looked reproachfully at the therapist.

She rolled her eyes. "I'll have to check with the farm owner."

"Splendid! Why don't you give Justin the good news?"

"But we haven't agreed anything yet!"

"Oh, but I think you know we have." The fingers on both his hands were crossed inside his soutane pockets, and he offered up a simple prayer: Thank you, Lord!

Removing one hand he touched the therapist on the shoulder. "I'll let you two sort out the details while I call the rescue."

Dr. Forbes shook her head. "No wonder God chose you as His ambassador!"

"I'll take that as a compliment," he replied and walked back to his dented vehicle. While he was on the phone to the lady who ran the rescue organization, he watched Linda Forbes, PhD open the gate and walk up to Justin.

She touched his arm and he pushed her hand away without turning round. Undeterred, the therapist talked to his back. Suddenly the man's demeanor changed from grief-stricken to joy. He hugged a surprised Dr. Forbes.

The priest smiled gleefully. She'll have to adopt Isaac now!

And he would have to be very persuasive with the director of the rescue.

Sitting in his car, he dialed her number and explained how Isaac had helped Justin and was destined to do the same for who knew how many veterans if he went into Dr. Forbes' therapy program? With Isaac there, Justin would also continue to improve.

The horse would be helping our military, and didn't they deserve that chance at healing from PTSD?

"But I already promised him to another lady."

"Have you signed the adoption papers yet?"

"No, but -"

"Don't you have a rideable horse she could adopt?"

"Yes, but she's set her heart on Isaac."

"Please tell her that she's doing a good thing for the horse and her country if she lets him go. That this was meant to be and she'll be much happier paying the bills on a horse she can ride than on a lawn ornament."
“And if that doesn’t prick her conscience, tell her to talk to me.”

The director cleared her throat. “Well, there’s no doubt about the enormous benefit Isaac would be to the therapy program, given what you’ve told me about his effect on your friend, Justin. I’ll see what I can do, Father.”

“I have every confidence your young lady will see the wisdom of letting him go.”

He exited his car and walked back to the paddock gate. “Permission to enter?” he asked.

With a wide grin, Justin motioned for him to join them.

As the priest drew near the veteran said, “I would hug you, as well, but Dr. Forbes has already received my daily quota.”

Father Michael said, “I shall consider myself hugged in spirit, then.”

“I take it you’re in dialogue with the rescue about switching adoptive homes for Isaac?” Dr. Forbes asked.

“Yes. I’m assisting the director in her mission to persuade the other party to give Isaac up.”

“So far it’s a verbal promise at present. I don’t believe in breaking promises, but they do have a rideable horse available for this person and that should tip things in our favor.”

Justin said, “Well, you have the direct line to God, Father, so I’m sure it will work out. Otherwise I’ll just have to steal him.” At the alarmed looks from the other two, he added, “Just joking, guys!”

Father Michael said, “I’ll let you both know when I’ve got the definite O.K. from the rescue.”

“And I’ll let the farmer know to expect another horse soon,” the therapist said.

“And I’ll let my family know that I might not slit my throat after all.”

Dr. Forbes’ eyes widened in horror and Father Michael’s expression was similar.

“Just joking!” Justin repeated.

“I certainly hope so,” said Father Michael.

“Speaking of throat-slitting, I’m really sorry to hear about what that jerk Stone did to your podcast interview.”

“Thank you, Justin. It was rather a shock.”

“And I understand a lot of people are leaving your church because of it.”

Father Michael didn’t feel like discussing the topic. “I trust it’s a temporary situation.”

“Me too.”

The priest saw his chance. “Of course, if you really feel sorry for me, you’ll come and fill my pews. One of you is as good as two regular parishioners.”
“Rejoicing over the one lost sheep that returns more than the ninety-nine that never strayed, eh? Good try, Father!”

The priest nodded demurely. “I’m glad you know your Bible, young man.”

All he could do was plant the seeds. It was up to God to water them and make them grow.

Leaving Justin to commune with Isaac, the therapist and pastor walked to their vehicles.

“I shall pray that both you and I are successful in persuading the necessary people to go along with our plan,” Father said.

“I guess I’d better flex my atrophied prayer muscles, Father, so that I can add mine to yours. I don’t know that they’ll be very efficacious, but at least I’ll feel I’m trying to be useful.”

“You’ve already been useful, Dr. Forbes. Thank you for what you’ve done today.”

“And thank you for working so hard to save Justin. I wish every veteran had a champion like you.”

“It’s all God’s work. I wish every veteran understood that Christ is their champion, if only they’d let Him be.”

“You have an uphill battle there, Father.”

“So did Christ. But the rewards are so worth it!”

“I admire your tenacity.” She put out her hand. “Let’s hope we both have good news very soon.”

Giving her hand a firm shake, he replied, “Amen to that!”
Chapter Twenty: A Solution for Robert
Thursday before Holy Week, March 23rd

A month passed by.

The young lady wanting to adopt Isaac had not been so easily persuaded to take on another horse. She was unimpressed with the arguments about helping Isaac, the military and her country, which had seemed so compelling to the parties who wanted her to give up her claim on the gelding.

“I’m about ready to ask Father Michael to have that chat with her,” the director of the horse rescue told Jack.

“I think I have another solution,” he replied. “How about telling her that if she takes the other horse, I’ll give her two months of free riding lessons on him, plus any training the horse may need?”

“That’s enormously generous of you, Mr. Harper. It might just do the trick.”

It did.

Of course, Jack had to endure Father Michael’s endless ribbing about how he was only happy when helping other people, and resentfully said, “Don’t you ever come to me again for help with your parishioners in need!”

“We both know you don’t mean that, Jack.”

Justin had been evaluated by Dr. Linda Forbes, who suggested he spend some time in her program, with Isaac continuing as his equine therapist. After that she would love to have him volunteer as a helper.

As long as Isaac was in the picture, Justin was happy to go along with this, and Father Michael was sure the ex-soldier would be as useful an addition to the program as the horse.

Jack was pleased to be off the hook as a pseudo therapist. The rescue had been quick to give him another horse to foster, but he warned his parish priest that this gelding would make a rotten therapy candidate, and not to even think about it!

Attendance at church was still low and Father Michael continued praying intensely for a resolution. He tried not to let it get him down, but it was hard. Next week was Holy Week and many of the RCIA candidates had gone to another parish to receive their instruction. Bishop Thurston was making noises about having to bring in another priest and move Father Michael to a smaller parish north of the diocese.

Meanwhile, not wishing to be diverted from his mission to save souls, he had been mulling over Robert’s situation.

And God had presented a possible solution, if the young man would go for it.
It was late Thursday afternoon: the teenager would be visiting his dog while Joe gave Alice a riding lesson and ignored his short friend. He sent Jack a quick text to make sure it was alright to show up at Harpers’ Reunion and was given the O.K.

Joe was standing in the middle of the outdoor arena as the priest drove past it to the front of the house. Simon’s pretty daughter, Alice was trotting in circles on Papa, the old paint horse.

The teenager waved at him with a grin, happy to be witnessed in his new role as instructor. Jack was leading a horse back to the barn.

But where was Robert?

With Jack’s help, the kid had only just got his self-confidence back after being bullied at school. Jack had made the kid a member of his farm team over summer last year and agreed to keep the dog fostered by the priest on Robert’s behalf.

The short teenager was a whiz at training dogs and had proved it with ‘Flex.

Father Michael got out of his car and leaned over the arena fence. “Hi Alice! Hi, Joe! Where’s Robert?” This was not because he couldn’t look for Robert himself, but to remind the teenage instructor of his friend.

“I’m not sure, Father. Maybe in the house doing homework.”

“O.K. Thanks!”

That didn’t sound good, but it would afford him privacy with the boy. He walked up the porch steps and tapped on the screen. The weather was mild today, and the front door was open.

Robert came into view with his black rescue dog and a sullen face, until he saw who it was. “Hi, Father! Come to check on your puppy?”

“You bet.”

Robert made the dog sit then opened the screen door. “Come on in. Thanks for giving me a break from school work.”

‘Flex recognized his legal owner. As soon as Robert said “Break!” he bounced over to the priest, wagging his tail furiously.

Father Michael smiled. “I wish my parishioners were this happy to see me. It makes a refreshing change.”

“What some iced tea?” Robert asked as he led the way into the kitchen.

“Yes, please.”

The pastor took his usual seat at the rustic pine table, opposite Robert’s school books and laptop, which took up most of the surface. “How have you been doing? Are you the only one who does any homework here?”

Robert’s face took on that sullen appearance again. “Sure feels like it.” He brought over two glasses of tea. “Like you can see, Joe’s got better things to do right now.”

“But doesn’t Alice have homework, too?”
“Yes.”

“I imagine a condition of her having lessons with Joe is that they both make sure their school work isn’t neglected.”

Robert stared at the table. “Yeah, it was supposed to be.”

“Hasn’t Mr. Jack noticed?”

“Yes, Mr. Jack has noticed,” came Jack’s voice. “I’m about to go back out there and make that point to both of them.” He went to the sink and washed his hands. “But I think I’ll have a glass of water with you guys first.” A look from Father Michael revised his plan. “On the other hand, the sooner I deal with this the better. See you in a bit.”

He waved at the priest, who nodded his appreciation and said to Robert, “I want to ask you if you’d be willing to do a parishioner a favor.”

The teenager looked unimpressed until Father Michael added, “It has to do with dogs.”

Now he had Robert’s full attention.

“There’s a girl in the class below you at St. Jude’s who’s having trouble with her dog. Her parents have told her that she’ll have to get rid of it if she doesn’t sort it out.

“I guess that means taking him to a shelter. So I hope you don’t mind, but when I told her how good you are at training dogs she begged me – begged, mind you, Robert, not asked – to see if you’d be willing to work on her dog with her. She wanted me to assure you that she’s very motivated.”

“What breed of dog is it and what kind of problems does it have?”

Father Michael could see Robert trying not to look excited and working hard to appear professional and aloof.

“It’s a German Shepherd mix and apparently it barks all the time. It also knocks them down in the doorway and puts its paws on the counters and drags food and anything else it can find off them. Plus, it’s a nightmare to take for a walk.”

“I guess I could work with it. It all depends. Who is she?”

“Pippa Redwood. Do you know her?”

Robert’s eyes flew wide open. “Do I know her!?”

“I take it you have a favorable opinion of her?”

“Well, duh! Have you seen her?”

“She is pretty cute.”

“Cute? She’s beautiful!” He frowned. “But when she finds out it’s me, she won’t want me to help her.”

“Robert, you’re a great dog trainer, and she needs you to save her dog. She’d be thrilled to have you help her! I told you, she begged me to talk to you!” He looked slyly at Robert. “Even
after she knew exactly whom I was talking about.” Robert still seemed anxious, so Father changed tactics. “Should you meet at her place, where you can see the dog in his normal environment? Would that be the best?” He was giving Robert no chance to veto this project.

“Er – yeah, that would be good. Then I can assess the dog’s behavior and figure out what needs doing.”

Good man! “I’ll give you a call when I’ve set it up. Unless you want to phone her?”

“Um, no, that’s fine, Father. You go ahead. Just let me know when and where I need to be.”

“Will do. I’ll leave you to your homework - and I have strong a feeling you won’t be in here by yourself for much longer.”

Sure enough, as the priest walked out onto the porch he saw Alice getting off the horse with Jack standing by, talking to her and his son.

He got into his car and dialed Pippa Redwood’s number.
Chapter Twenty-One: Another Podcast
Thursday, 23rd March before Holy Week

Father Michael was in much better spirits when he drove back to his tiny apartment. He could still help others even if things were going badly for him personally. It made carrying his cross easier. Hadn’t Christ said, in Matthew 5:11: ‘Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.’?

But his good mood quickly evaporated when he again saw the light flashing on his answering machine. He clicked the button and closed his eyes against the coming storm.

It was indeed a message from Bishop Thurston. “Father, I want to know if you’ve listened to a podcast that your brother-in-law brought to my attention. If not, you may want to talk to him.”

Not another podcast! Yet the bishop didn’t sound particularly agitated about it.

In trepidation he dialed his brother-in-law’s number.

“Hello Father! Good news about that podcast, isn’t it?”

“I’ve not heard it, Simon. The bishop told me to ask you about it.”

“You’ve got to listen to it.”

“What on earth is it about?”

“That would be giving the game away. Have you a pen handy?”

There was a pause while Father Michael rummaged under some papers on the counter and found one. “I do now.”

He recognized the web address that Simon gave him as that of the equine therapy program run by Dr. Forbes. He was at a complete loss as to why he should listen to a podcast on that site and asked his relative again for clarification. But he got the same answer as before.

“Just listen to it.”

He hung up with an exasperated sigh, turned on his laptop, took a bottle of water out of the fridge and came back to his desk to type the site address into the search box.

Once that had loaded he found the link to the podcast. Above it was a photo of Justin standing next to the skinny horse that had saved him. The podcast was entitled: “The Miracle of Isaac.”

Unsure what to expect, the priest clicked the play button.

It was a recording of Dr. Linda interviewing Justin and by the end of the 45 minutes the priest was ready to cry. He didn’t know what had prompted this podcast, but was profoundly grateful.
Later Jack told him that when the priest had left Harpers’ Reunion, after arranging for Isaac to become an equine therapist with Dr. Forbes instead of being adopted elsewhere, the three of them had talked about the injustice of Fred Stone’s behavior.

They agreed how unfair it was that a man who only ever wanted to help others should be so brutally misrepresented when trying to spread the truth about his faith.

It was Justin who’d come up with the plan to restore the priest’s good name. Part of it was to make the podcast of Dr. Forbes interviewing Justin about Isaac’s role in healing the veteran’s PTSD.

The podcast would encourage other veterans looking into equine therapy as a possible option for them.

But the real reason behind the recording was to give credit to Father Michael for bringing Justin to Jack’s farm to meet horses and see if he felt comfortable around them. And how, when he heard that Isaac was going to be adopted by someone else, he took steps to have the horse adopted into Dr. Forbes’ program.

“It’s only because of Father Michael that I met Isaac and began to feel and trust again and enjoy life.

“I was seriously considering suicide when I heard Isaac was going to a new home. Father Michael cared so much about me that he made sure that horse would stay in my life - and not only that, but he would give other veterans their lives back, too.

“Father Michael is a dedicated priest and a credit to Our Lady of Sorrows and the Catholic Church.”

The priest smiled at this, for the veteran had stopped just short of saying that he, too, believed in God. He’d barely finished listening to the interview when Simon called to ask if he’d heard it.

“Just now,” the priest replied. “I can’t thank those two enough for what they’ve done for me.”

“Well, Joe, Robert and Alice have spread the word at school and we’re emailing all the parishioners with the link and asking them to be fair and listen. But that’s not all Justin’s done, Father.”

“What else can he possibly have done?”

“A little bird told me he went round to see Fred Stone.”

“Oh, no! We’re not going to read in the local paper about how ‘Veteran Murders Stone Thrower’ are we?”

Simon laughed. “No, nothing like that!”

“Well, what did he do, then? I do hope it wasn’t illegal?”

“Mmm, possibly semi-legal, but very effective.”

Father Michael groaned. This was not what he wanted! He winced and said, “O.K. tell me.”
“The version I heard was that Justin pointed out he was a Special Forces guy, with training to match, and has a bunch of friends just like him. After delivering that nugget of information, he went on to tell Mr. Stone how Father Michael is a very dear friend of his, who had done him great kindness which deserved to be returned.

“He then politely asked Fred Stone to hand over the recording of his conversation with the priest, to delete his podcast and to issue a formal apology for what he’d broadcast.”

Father was concerned about what was coming next. “I can’t imagine Mr. Stone was very happy about that.”

“He wasn’t, but allegedly Justin moved purposefully towards the man’s very expensive recording equipment. He pointed to the microphone and innocently asked whether it was an important part of Mr. Stone’s podcasting business? This made Mr. Stone very nervous. Justin also explained that the man’s sponsors would not be happy to discover what kind of fraudulent reporting he was engaging in, and would pull out as soon as Justin informed them about it.

“Anyway, you get the gist. Justin didn’t exactly threaten the man, but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of animosity.

“Fred Stone has removed the false podcast and issued a new one with all the material on it. It begins with an apology for his previous recording. He has also sent an apology to Bishop Thurston. Our Lady of Sorrows will shortly have the link to the real interview on its website together with a transcript. You should have an apology from him in your email inbox, too.

“So the combined efforts of various people will hopefully have spread the word sufficiently.”

Father Michael swallowed hard. “I’m overwhelmed, Simon. I don’t know what to say.”

“No need, Father. Let’s just hope you can put this behind you. It shows how far Justin has come that he wanted to help you and that he had the self-control not to kill Fred Stone, doesn’t it?”

Father Michael laughed. “Indeed it does! But I must thank Justin somehow. I suspect he’s a hard guy to thank without embarrassing. Would you have any ideas for me?”

“That’s a tough one, how to thank someone for something they’ve done to thank you.”

“I feel very indebted to him for this, Simon. He really pulled out all the stops for me.”

“He feels you did the same for him, Father.”

“Yes, but - “

“Seems your pride wants you to have the last word.” Simon’s tone was jocular, but not his message.

“Ouch! Touché, brother-in-law! I’ll settle for a thank-you note.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Otherwise you’ll both be doing each other favors in return for favors for the rest of your lives.”

Father Michael chuckled then became serious. “Simon, you recall my wager with Justin?”

“That he would come to Mass at Easter if you could get him to believe in God again?”
“Yes. What do you think the chances are of that happening? Do you think he is at all close to re-converting?”

“I simply don’t know, Father. He may be opening up these days, but that’s still a topic I don’t dare broach with him.”

“I understand. I’ll have to wait until he gives me an opportunity to ask him.”

“Easter is round the corner, so you don’t have long.”

“I know.”
Chapter Twenty-Two: A Red Letter Day
Wednesday, of Holy Week, March 26th

Father Michael sent a note to Justin thanking him for restoring the priest’s good name. He sent it the old-fashioned way, as he believed such correspondence should not be fired off in an email or text.

He noticed an upturn in attendance at the Palm Sunday Masses after the airing of both Justin’s podcast and the revised podcast from Mr. Fred Stone. Yet strangely no one showed up for Confession on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week after morning Mass.

As usual Father Michael had arranged for four other priests to hear confessions that Wednesday evening. This was to encourage parishioners to take advantage of the sacrament with a priest other than himself, if that made them more comfortable.

Among those who were at ease with their pastor were Jack and Laura, about to go on their real honeymoon. Hopefully it would be a romantic reunion for them after the grueling months of virtual separation because of Mrs. Harper’s new job. They wanted to be in a State of Grace to receive Communion on Easter Day and they both came to him.

Thus he learned how hard each spouse was trying to be kind as well as the silly things they did that drove the other crazy.

His answer to both of them was the same: “God has given you your spouse to help you get to Heaven. Sometimes he/she will show you more kindness than you deserve. At other times you will be sanctified through the trials God sends you in your marriage.”

He told both of them to thank God for their marriage and pray for their spouse every day. As their penance he asked them to spend the whole of the next day trying to outdo the other in kindness.

Jack also confided that the flirtatious instructor had left of her own accord, and with Laura’s input he had hired a Bereiter, a top riding trainer from Germany. The young man lived in the States and was very serious about his job. His teenage charge was learning a great deal more from him than he had from the infamous Miss Maddie.

“That’s wonderful, Jack, and you didn’t have to fire her after all.”

Joe also came to Confession.

He admitted to not spending enough time with Robert and feeling bad about it. “It’s hard having to choose between two people I like so much. I really get on with Alice and we have a lot in common with the horses and all.”

“I’m glad you realize Robert is feeling left out. Try to include him in your activities with Alice where you can, and pray for him.”
When the teenager left, Father Michael opened his Breviary. For the rest of the evening, based on the lack of penitents coming to see him this week, he knew he wouldn’t be in demand, whereas the visiting priests would be very busy.

But in this he was terribly wrong. The line outside his confessional was becoming impossibly long and the ushers were trying to get penitents to go to the other confessors. But they were having no luck: everyone wanted to see Father Michael, and that was that.

It started with the first person after Joe, a noticeable absentee after the airing of the original podcast, who went behind the screen instead of taking up his usual position in the chair opposite the priest. “Father, forgive me for I have sinned. It has been a month since my last confession.” The man coughed in embarrassment and Father Michael waited quietly.

“I was quick to judge my parish priest and hasty to believe the worst of him. I was wrong and for that I am heartily sorry. I hope you and God can forgive me.”

“Christ has forgiven you, my son, and in His name so do I. It took courage for you to admit your mistake and I accept your apology.”

When the priest had absolved the man and given him his penance, he heard him being asked outside the door by the next in line, in hushed tones, “How did it go? Is he mad?”

The newly-absolved man replied, “He was mercy itself, just as you would expect. Don’t worry.”

Father Michael smiled. So that was why no one had been to confession this week until now! Dreading having to confess to him how they had wronged him, they had waited until the eleventh hour.

The next man was someone whom Father Michael had frequently counseled about how to live the Christian life despite his same-sex attraction. He began behind the screen, but during their conversation moved out and seated himself opposite the priest, as he had always done in the past.

“I’ve really missed being able to talk to you, Father. It was a shock to think you’d been faking your concern for people in my situation.

“I’m so glad you’re still the priest I thought you were. I need you to help me with this.”

Father Michael looked at the man intently. “You know that I still won’t be compromising on where the Church stands, though, don’t you?”

“Yes, Father. But I need to hear that - even though I hate being told!”

“It’s always available when you need to come and talk.”

It was going to be a long evening, but a good one.

Yet despite his euphoria over the turnaround in his parishioners’ opinion of him, there was still one person he had hoped to see in his confessional - but he never came.

So Father Michael went to bed that night with a prayer of deep thanks to God for the incredible change He’d wrought in his congregation, and an extra prayer for Justin. “Lord, all the healing in
the world from a horse won’t be enough if he doesn’t come to love the Person Who created Isaac.”
Chapter Twenty-Three: Easter Sunday
Easter Sunday, April 2nd

Our Lady of Sorrows Church congregation was back to full strength on Easter Sunday.
All the Masses were full, although Father Michael was aware that some of those sitting in the pews were the ‘Poinsettia and Lilies’ set, the ones who only attend Mass at Christmas and Easter.

As he looked out on the faces in front of him, he understood what God meant - and Justin had mentioned - when He said how He rejoiced more over the one stray sheep who returns to the fold, than the ninety-nine others who never wandered away in the first place. Although here it was more a case of the ninety-nine who strayed.

His homily emphasized how Jesus died on the Cross to save us, and that His mercy is, as St. Faustina reported Our Lord as saying, “endless, and the treasury of His compassion inexhaustible.” God loves a repentant sinner and will always take him back into friendship with Him.

The line of people wanting to shake the priest’s hand after the service was much longer than it had been even before the podcast debacle.

At the noon Mass he saw the Harpers sitting next to Robert and his parents. On the other side Alice sat next to Joe, with her parents. Father Michael caught Simon’s eye briefly and the man shook his head. Justin wasn’t coming.

Pippa Redwood was sitting by Robert with her parents. The shy looks passing between the dog trainer and the dog owner didn’t escape the priest’s keen eye - or that of the teenagers’ parents, he noted.

Clearly things were going well for the young man: he must have been successful in training Pippa’s wayward German Shepherd mix.

Raising the Host during the Consecration, Father Michael felt gratitude for his congregation, his friends and the way their lives were coming together.

Afterwards, when the Redwoods wished their pastor a Happy Easter, Pippa’s father pointed to Robert and said what a transformation he had brought about in “that dog.” His daughter beamed at the teenager.

Next in line, Angela Weinstock hugged the priest and Simon shook his hand heartily.

Flanked by Joe, Alice smiled at Father Michael. “You’re a saint, Father!”

The priest coughed in embarrassment, as Laura stepped up and asked, “Are you sure you won’t join us for lunch, Father?”

Both of them had invited him several days ago and the priest was very moved by their kindness. But he knew he should visit his mother and go with her to see his father in the nursing home.
He shook his head. “Thanks again, but I need to spend some time with my family. I’ll take a rain check on that lunch, though!”

“Sure thing, Father,” Jack said.

“Bring your riding things when you come,” Joe added.

“I certainly will, young man. Have a blessed Easter.”

“You, too, Father,” Laura said, as the next family pressed forwards to greet their priest.

It took over half an hour to get through the line and Father Micael was more than ready to change out of his vestments for his trip to Charlottesville.

He was in the vestry removing his white chasuble when he heard a knock on the door. A parishioner must have forgotten something. He opened to see Justin standing there.

“Father, bless me for I have sinned. It is ten years since my last confession.” He looked up with a perplexed expression. “I’ve no idea what to say next.”

“I’ll guide you through, don’t worry. Let’s start with what’s brought you here and go on from there.”

“There’s talk of redeploying me to Iraq, Father, and it may be soon.”

“But surely they can’t do that to you! You’re only just getting over your PTSD!”

“Now that I’m enrolled in Dr. Forbes’ program, I’m on the radar again. Dr. Forbes has to keep the military informed of my progress, so they can determine when I’m ready to go back into the war zone.”

“I am sorry. Now I feel terrible for introducing you to the whole horse thing.”

“You mean I was far better off as a bitter and twisted human being, whose only friend was anger?” the veteran said. “No, Father. I don’t regret any of it. Thanks to you, this time I know where to come for ‘repair work’ if they do send me out again.”

“But that’s harsh, sending you straight back into the lion’s den.”

“Yes, it is. But what worries me more than my PTSD returning is the thought of dying without having reconciled myself to God.” Justin tilted his head slightly with a smile. “You’ve won the wager, Father.”

The priest was jubilant. “When I didn’t see you at Easter Mass today, I just assumed that you didn’t believe in God at all.”

“I thought I didn’t either. But you showed me the Christian way - leading people to God through your actions and not through preaching at me. Thanks to you, I met Isaac.” The large-muscled man’s face softened.

Father Michael couldn’t resist. “You mean, that day when I drove you to the ‘petting zoo’?”

“That was some petting zoo! The animals were a lot bigger than I expected.”

“Has Isaac renewed your faith in a Good Creator?”
“God made that horse to help me - I’m convinced of it, Father.”

“So am I. Now let me guide you back to the Catholic Church, Justin, and if it is His will to redeploy you, you can go to Iraq with a spotless soul.”

“There’s nothing I want more.”

“Then let’s begin.”

THE END
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About the Author

Now an American citizen, Hilary originally hails from England and lives in Maryland with her husband, home-bred gelding, ginger house cat, tabby barn cat and, of course, two English Bulldogs.

Her writings include Christian inspirational fiction and short stories about horses, other animals and the occasional human. She has also penned a humorous horse memoir, *The Horse Bumbler* series as well as books about competing in dressage and purchasing the ideal horse for a beginner rider.

The rest of her time is spent training and competing on Cruz Bay, the Welsh Cob Thoroughbred Cross she bred and backed, and lamenting the fact that she still has a long way to go before reaching her dressage goals!

But her real goal is to make it to heaven, and do what she can to encourage others to get there, too.
Acknowledgements

No book is ever written in a vacuum, and this one is no exception.
I owe a big ‘thank you’ to the following people for being beta readers for me, some of them for the fourth time! They are, in alphabetical order:

- Celeste Behsmann
- Peter Bennett
- Wendy Emblin - who tirelessly went through this book many times over!
- Gail Gordon
- Lori Harrington
- Linda O’Donnell

Extra gratitude goes to Lori Harrington, director of Freedom Hill Rescue, who brought Noah into my life and gave me the idea for this story.

Hugs go to Noah - the real life Isaac - who helped heal the wounds of Double Clover’s death when he arrived on my farm, and whose life events provided me with the inspiration for this novel.
My respect and huge thanks to Kevin Murphy of the Special Forces, for giving me his valuable time to open up the world of the PTSD sufferer for me and for adopting Noah on his beautiful farm.

Thank you to Lyndi Caruso, the essential oils guru, for introducing me to Kevin.

Finally, I'd like to voice my appreciation to my spiritual director for checking the Catholic theology in this book.
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