

**VIGILANTE  
PRIEST**

*By*

*Joe Gallagher and Dan Bowden*

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# PROLOGUE

*Seventeen Months Ago*

## FATHER TONY

Sipping my Tuscan red, I stared blankly out my Vatican office window into the throng of tourists in Saint Peter's Square. I knew wine and sleeplessness were a bad combination, but I wanted to steel myself. Or perhaps numb myself.

My nights had grown increasingly restless over the last five years. I had known about the Vatican's sad, dark secret since arriving in Italy four decades ago—in fact, the secret, or some twisted version of it, had brought me here. But five years ago was when I saw the actual list for the first time. I wondered then what the right thing to do was, and whether I could do it. I was a coward.

My cell phone rang. The call was fifteen minutes late.

“Pronto.” I answered.

It was Daniel O'Malley's driver. His boss was a remarkable man, a great supporter of the church, who shared my roots in the Bronx, New York's famous-yet-floundering borough. O'Malley, a

hyper-focused billionaire, once told me that “On time is late,” so I was surprised his driver was calling behind schedule.

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The driver, a stocky man with an olive complexion, was dressed in an expensive suit. This was juxtaposed with the electric mini FIAT he was driving. Whatever O’Malley had to tell me, he wanted it to be low profile.

“Father, I haven’t been to church for a while. How should I address you? Is it Father Morelli, Father Anthony, or Father Tony?”

“Any one of them is fine.”

Sitting in the back, I began to open the mini bottle of Pellegrino placed in one of the cupholders.

“Father Morelli, if you could please not open that, I would appreciate it.” My driver’s voice was pure New York City, my old home.

As I put it down, I noticed the heavy tint on the windows. “Where are we going?”

“Actually, Father, it’s better that you don’t know.”

I was about to say something when the driver continued, “Do you see the plastic bag on the back seat, the one from the pharmacy?”

It was the only other thing in the back seat besides me and the Pellegrino. “Yes.”

“I need you to put it on.”

Opening the plastic bag, I could see the black fabric inside a clear plastic bag and assumed it was a surgical mask. I remembered that Daniel did not sound like his robust self during our previous conversation. “Is he sick?”

The driver didn’t answer.

When I opened the inner bag, I was shocked. It wasn’t a mask, but a full hood. There was a single hole, presumably for my mouth.

This was meant to cover my entire head. I saw the driver's eyes staring back at me in the rearview mirror.

"Won't this call attention to us? I mean, if other drivers see me?"

"Put it on, lie low, close your eyes, and relax, Father."

I donned the hood which turned my world pitch black as the fabric covered not only my head but went to the base of my neck.

I took his advice. I closed my eyes and tried to nap.

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The driver gently tugged my right arm. I had fallen asleep. Immersed in the darkness, I reflexively went for the hood as the driver grabbed my wrist to stop me.

"No. No, Father. Just a few steps now."

He helped me sit up. Then guiding me by my arm, steered me out of the car, across cobblestones, up some steps, and into a corridor with a hard floor where our steps echoed. Finally, we turned into a room with a carpet, and I heard a familiar voice.

"You can take that off, Father Tony," Daniel said.

I pulled off my hood. We were in a huge, elegant room. A palazzo, I guessed, from the stately windows. Growing up in a New York family, as a Centeno, I recognized the aesthetics of the home of a connected Italian family. There were not many O'Malleys that you would see in a place like this.

Danny, as I had called him since childhood, looked pale and unhealthy. I quickly ran to embrace him.

His wide eyes stopped me.

I had forgotten about his haphephobia. He avoided being touched at all costs. Even to the point where he refused communion. My heart hurt for him.

"Daniel!" I sobbed.

"So I look that bad?" The normally vibrant O'Malley sighed.

I nodded. “It’s a shock. You—” I searched for the right words. “You are a man who exudes positive energy.”

“But not anymore?”

I cursed myself for my insensitivity. “May I ask about your condition?”

“I’ll spare you the details. But it’s terminal.”

I was stunned.

“But I have some time.” O’Malley brightened slightly. “Doctors say a year, maybe two.”

“I pray there will be more.”

“Regardless, I’m here about you, Father. There is nothing I can do regarding me, but you... I want to fix what happened to you.” O’Malley sipped some whiskey from a short glass.

He continued, “You remember when we met?”

My friend was going to die, and here he was thinking of helping me as his dying wish. I could barely speak. “Of course,” I sputtered. “You had quit the football team. I remember Sandro Accardi was furious at you. You were his star receiver.”

O’Malley swirled his drink. I heard the clink of ice cubes.

“And then you told me why. You told me you didn’t like one of my fellow priests, one of the football coaches. The one that my nephew accused much later.”

“There was no way you could have known. I didn’t name names, and there were four coaches.”

I shook my head. I had revisited that scene many times. “We weren’t as aware as we should have been. But I should have seen the signs. You gave up something you loved. It was obvious, in retrospect, what you were trying to tell me. I should have investigated. And then...”

“And then you were falsely accused.”

I nodded. I had insisted on my innocence. “I met with my bishop and explained that this was a shrewd fabrication. With my linguistics background and fluency in multiple languages, including

Italian and Latin, they had other plans for me. Many years later, my accuser privately admitted that he had lied about the accusation, but I was already settled.

“I took my vows to help, never to harm. I was fortunate. I had an exemplary record. My school, St. Francis, was well regarded. It was not far behind the esteemed Jesuit-run Regis High School, in terms of getting our students into top colleges. I was moved to the Vatican. I worked in the public affairs division, and studied and worshiped at the sacred center of Christ’s church. Leaving my nephew Angel, his assigned protector Sandro Accardi, and you behind.”

O’Malley finished his drink. “Your family is with me on this, the Centenos and the other New York families, for that matter, not to mention your accuser. He will tell the world that what he said about you was a lie. I have the mayor willing to make an official statement on behalf of the city and tell the story of how you were falsely accused. I’ve donated enough money to the church and the city. I can ask for a favor like this.”

This was a sign. I would no longer be a coward.

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We took a break for a late lunch and decided to lighten the conversation. We laughed about how Accardi, the quarterback he had abandoned in high school, had become his closest friend years later.

We laughed about the fight that broke out between the police precincts, between my nephew and Liam Hannigan and how that all got sorted.

After lunch was finished, and the table was cleared, O’Malley had another drink and steered the conversation back to forcing an apology from the church and allowing the stain to be removed from

my name. “So what do you think? You ready to fly back to the Big Apple? Get the key to the city, maybe—”

“I have a list,” I said, interrupting a man who was not used to being interrupted. “A very secret list. It relates to your very kind project.”

“A list?” He was irritated.

“A list of protected priests.”

O’Malley was dumbfounded. “You mean priests who...” His anger was rising. “Molesters? We are talking about molesters, right?”

I nodded. “Accused priests who have been moved to new parishes or banished to desk jobs. But they are still part of the Holy See, despite the stain they carry and risk of recidivism.”

O’Malley fell back into his seat in shock.

The silence hurt. It was a weight. A weight I bore for my cowardice. “I’ll make it public. That’s the least I can do. I can do that. We will tell your story. You know, officially.”

O’Malley was silent.

It was more than just a rumor that O’Malley had been molested. It was an accepted fact by those in power in New York City. The city as a whole didn’t know. It didn’t matter. I just wanted my friend to speak to me.

His voice was measured. “You know I wanted to be a doctor, right?”

I did, but I didn’t answer him.

“My parents knew I was a genius as a young boy. They kept me on grade *for my benefit!* So I could socialize. There was no way for them to know what would happen to me at a religious high school. I mean, how could they? Children of God,” he spat.

I bowed my head.

“Did I tell you what happened on my wedding night?”

He hadn’t.

“I could barely touch Maria. For years, because of what



happened, I wondered about myself. Was I like him? Maria and I, we didn't have a normal courtship. She was a good Catholic and tolerant about my condition. We would kiss and neck, but it was work for me. I had to explain; I had to introduce her to my shrink! And then, when it was time, when we were married, on my wedding night... Well, I couldn't. He took that from me, the son of a bitch. And the church hid him and so many others!"

"Danny..."

He turned angrily toward me. I worried that he equated me with those who had wounded him. But instead, he sat back into his chair and finished the rest of his whiskey, the ice cube long gone.

"So you have a list." He looked into the empty glass. "Well, reporting this to the press won't do much good. They'll just deny it. We need to make this bigger. We need to send a message. No longer can we allow children to be hurt. If we make the message big enough. If we make it clear enough. We can change everything."

Daniel O'Malley stood and walked around the small hundred-year-old wooden table toward me. "You would do this with me, wouldn't you?"

I didn't know what my friend was asking, exactly. But I agreed with him. Something had to be done. I nodded. I was in.



# VIGILANTE PRIEST I

## *Not The Beginning I Wanted*

### FATHER TONY

I remember the first time I saw total, absolute terror in a man's eyes. The fear that he was going to die. It was at a family wedding. It wasn't where I would have expected to see such a thing.

At the wedding, Salvatore made a toast. He praised his daughter and the groom; he talked about love and honor. And then he talked about friendship, trust, and decency. "Everyone here is family to me," he said. "Except for one guest."

Then he paused. He always commanded attention, but now even the waiters filling water glasses froze in place. "Can you imagine that on this very special day, the biggest day of her life, someone here, a friend of ours, burdened Anna Maria with a tale of his own stupid debts. And then this snake bad-mouthed me to my own daughter, as if I were responsible for his drug habit, alimony, gambling problem, and stupid business deals. And he begged Anna Maria to ask me for mercy."

The whole thing seemed surreal. Salvatore stared at a man at the

table next to mine, and everyone followed his gaze. I saw the man's eyes grow wide as he realized what was about to unfold. He was paralyzed. He knew he was a dead man.

As three men in dark suits approached the table, my cousin and table mate, Luca, grabbed my arm and said, "Father Tony, you don't want to be here for this."

But it was too late.

"No, no, no!" the man cried, as one of a trio pulled his seat away from the table.

Another blocked the guests' view and got very close to the man's face, demanding his silence, while the third dragged him from the table and quietly ushered him out through the back.

"My sincere apologies," Salvatore's wife said, raising a champagne flute. "To family!"

The image of the marked man has stayed with me.

Now I was like Salvatore. I was the bringer of death.

*For the wages of sin is death*, I thought, not wanting to finish the verse in my head.

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Sandy Accardi, my nephew Angel and I watched Father Charlie make his way to a coffee shop. I had told him to meet me there. That we had things to discuss best addressed outside of the church. It wasn't technically a lie.

He left the church, and we followed in a white van. Two blocks from the coffee shop, he waited for the light to change. Sandy stopped the van in front of him, Angel pulled a black surgical mask over his face, hopped out, and greeted Father Charlie with a 9mm Glock. "You're coming with me," Angel said as he pointed into the open side door of the van. He then pushed the portly priest in.

"Why are you doing this?" Father Charlie looked confused.

No one responded, so Father Charlie spoke again: “I am a priest. Why would you do this?”

I sat up front. There was no way I was going to respond. Although my heart wanted to scream at him. “You should know exactly why we’re doing this! You have brought this on yourself. The only shameful miracle is it’s taken this long to erase the permanent shadow you have brought into this world.”

But I couldn’t say anything until it was over.

I had a hat and a mask on. We all did. It was the one upside to COVID; it provided a bit of cover for our daylight operation. But Father Charlie might recognize my voice. He knew I was an emissary of the Vatican, and it wasn’t the time for him to put things together.

“This makes no sense,” Father Charlie said. “I am penniless. I was on my way to meet a senior member of the Vatican. There will be a manhunt as soon as I am late.”

“You are going to be very late,” sneered Sandy. “Now shut the fuck up or we’ll put a bullet in your head.”

Father Charlie began to sob.

I thought about his many delusions. That he was safe. That he was protected. That he thought the meeting I’d arranged was aboveboard.

*A truthful witness saves lives, but he who utters lies is treacherous.*

Me not telling Father Charlie I was here was a lie by omission. It felt wrong.

“I—” I had to say something.

“You shut up, too! Not another fucking word,” Sandy said.

“Hey, cool it,” Angel said. “Show some respect.”

“Sorry, Fa— sorry.”

He was absolutely right. I looked back down in shame.

Once Cardinal Uelichar told me there was a list, more than five years ago, I should have acted immediately. Now, after much

anguish and speaking with Daniel O'Malley, I was committed to the process.

I had been appointed one of three watchers over the troubled priests. I was given access to all the names in the United States. There was a dossier on each of them. Many in the Vatican regretted letting the sinners and their transgressions go unpunished but turning a blind eye had become a generational process. The process was meant to preserve the sanctity of the Church while also protecting the public. I was given access and trusted with this information, because regardless of what I said, I was believed to be one of them.

Decades ago, I accepted the judgment of the Vatican and stayed in Italy from that moment on. But I had never been at peace.

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Nobody spoke until we got to the warehouse. We drove in, and Angel pulled Father Charlie out of the van and sat him on a chair in the middle of the floor. Sandy shoved a rag in his mouth and tied him up.

The architect was there when we arrived.

Once a strong, athletic man, a billionaire, triathlete, he was now frail. But his fury animated him.

"Do you know who I am?" he seethed at Father Charlie.

The priest made a muffled sound, and Sandy pulled the rag out of the prisoner's mouth.

"Daniel O'Malley?" Father Charlie was stunned. O'Malley had given so much money to the Catholic Church, he seemed destined for sainthood. "There must be some mistake. Please, help me."

"We know your past," O'Malley said, sitting down on a chair provided by Sandy.

*Let he who is without sin...*

"My past?" Father Charlie questioned.

“Lie to me. I want you to lie to me.” O’Malley’s face turned sinister. He had a lot to be angry about. The cancer was destroying his body and his future, after a past he had fought so hard to recover from.

Father Charlie licked his lips. “Let me explain myself.”

“Go on.” O’Malley smiled. It was a wicked smile.

*The one who conceals hatred has lying lips.*

“It’s just... It’s just...” Father Charlie was defeated.

“Take him,” O’Malley spat.

*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.*

“Wait!” Father Charlie screamed, then mumbled, “I’m gay.”

This infuriated Angel. “Gay! Who the fuck cares if you are gay? This isn’t about being gay. This is about corrupting innocence. It’s about fucking—”

“No. That’s what I am saying. The ones that you are concerned about. They were also... gay.”

“They were fourteen and sixteen!” O’Malley roared. I worried for the frail man’s health.

“I know,” Father Charlie mumbled. “But it’s not like I corrupted them.”

O’Malley almost whispered, “Then why did John Danvers kill himself at age seventeen?”

“What?” Father Charlie looked shocked. Was this the first time he’d heard about the damage he’d caused? It seemed impossible.

“Take him,” O’Malley said. He shook his head and looked at me in commiseration, as if looking for approval.

“Dear God,” I breathed out. I was horrified. I had wanted to get the names to the people in power to protect the innocent. Now I wondered who, exactly, was innocent. *Was I?*





## CHAPTER ONE

### *Life 2.0*

#### **EDDIE**

My half-brother, Paul, didn't want an honest answer to his question.

"It went better than expected," I responded.

Paul had booked the vaccination appointment. But both my brothers rarely visited our mumbling, fading father. And by default, I had become the old man's chaperone.

I drove him to the appointment in the back of my unmarked cop car. Technically, it was against department regulations. But my ancient beater was barely running, and necessity, as a fellow cop once told me, is the mother of corruption. As violations go, this wasn't going to get me in much trouble.

My dad stank of piss, cigarettes, and alcohol. He was seventy years old and hadn't been able to take care of himself, except to light up and pour drinks, for the last ten.

He avoided throwing up or soiling the car, and none of the three or four words he uttered were insults about my manhood or racial slurs, so the drive went better than expected. The appointment also

went better than I imagined. The federal government had upped its game. We were done in thirty minutes.

“That’s great, Eddie,” Paul said. Paul wasn’t a failure like me or a loser like our brother, Steve. He was just an inconsiderate prick. If I needed money, he’d send me money. If I asked for help with Dad, he’d half-ass something. He was a Wall Street sellout who had made enough money that he could leave the city and do his grift remotely from Maryland.

“Well, that’s great, Eddie. I’m sure he appreciates it.” I could hear Paul shuffling through some papers. He had better things to do. He didn’t enjoy talking to his fuck-up of a brother, not to mention his dad, whom he affectionately called “he” as opposed to “dad” or “father.” Paul wasn’t going to waste any more time on me. “All right, then. I’ll talk to you soon.” With that, the line went dead.

I knew I could count on Mr. Busy. I only had five minutes to get to my meeting with Internal Affairs.

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“You shot a kid.”

Internal Affairs never started with batting practice. Edna James, a tall African-American woman in her mid-forties was a veteran slugger at IA. She didn’t even offer a hello.

“I didn’t shoot a kid. I shot in the direction of a kid.” I had been down this road before.

“So, because you missed, does that make you a better cop?”

“I didn’t miss. I shot directly where I wanted.”

“Ballistics says you were no farther than four feet away from hitting him. Cutting it a bit close, if you were intentionally trying to miss him.”

I thought I was done with this. They had taken my gold shield. For me, there was no bigger punishment. I had worked hard for that three-inch piece of metal. Receiving it, along with being

made an anti-crime-unit detective was one of the happiest days of my life. I was one step closer to becoming a detective in Homicide.

But not anymore after the demotion came. Captain Broward reassigned me. I'd no longer be working active, in-the-thick-of-it cases, instead I would be in Missing Persons, supporting my old colleagues as a regular officer. At least I didn't have to wear a beat-cop uniform to work in Missing Persons. Captain Broward said in eighteen months we could try to get my gold shield back. Nobody said IA wasn't going to continue working on me, not even Bill, my union rep.

"You've already got me demoted! Do you want me out? Is that what you want? You really think I was trying to shoot some kid? You motherfuckers in your cozy offices are doing nothing to help the violence out there. Just finding new ways to jam us up, like videotaping us as if *we're* the fucking criminals. You doing that got me a fucking warning on some bullshit thing already. Why don't you use the cameras to stop scumbags selling fentanyl to seven-year-olds in the street? Cops like me are trying to keep some law and order in this city."

"Do you think all Black people are scumbags?" James was trying to goad me. It was working.

"No, and you know that's not what I am saying. I didn't bring up anything about race. You are trying to spin things because you hate cops. I'd appreciate a simple thank-you for patrolling the neighborhood so someone doesn't shiv you for the fifty dollars in your purse."

"Thank you." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Thank you so much, Mr. Rodriguez. You and your buddies wearing your Confederate T-shirts on the weekends are a blessing to all of us."

"You do realize I'm Latino, right? I'm not some hillbilly from Appalachia, and my T-shirts have rainbow flags, so get a clue with your stereotypes, bitch!"

Bill, my union advocate, jumped in. “Eddie didn’t mean that, Ms. James. He’s just angry because you are taking potshots at him.”

She turned her full attention to my advocate. “Mr. Wagner, I wouldn’t trust him separating recyclables at the dump. I am going to recommend removal from the force.”

“Good luck with that,” I seethed.

“Eddie, allow me to do my job and shut the fuck up,” Bill snapped at me, then he turned to my nemesis. “Ms. James, these are not good times for police officers, and Eddie has been under a great deal of stress. He has shown remorse. He’s already been demoted. He’s not working violent crimes anymore. He’s in Missing Persons. Just let him be, and he’ll be fine.”

“You going to be fine, Mr. Rodriguez?”

“Yes.” The fire had subsided for now.

All three of us were screwed. The force had been depleted by about 30 percent in the city. I blamed the liberals and bogus politicians for shit like this. Edna James blamed systemic racism and toxic masculinity for breeding scumbags like me. Bill, well, he was stuck between both of us.

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I wanted to be out on the street stopping crime, not picking up the pieces. That’s what it felt like in Missing Persons in the 41st Precinct, Fort Apache. I’d heard stories about how the cops who worked this beat in the seventies used to carry machine guns. Crime was so out of hand, one member of the force would spray the street with bullets to announce his arrival. That was the story, anyway. Things had gotten tamer over the years, but there was still action to be had.

If you were young enough, pretty enough, rich enough, or connected enough, you would get one of the senior officers at Missing Persons. Everyone else was stuck with me. I got the cases

in the 41st Precinct no one cared about. The lost causes. Most of my cases evolved from the same lead. The one that ended at the morgue. And then, if it looked like the misper—that's what we called them—landed in the freezer under suspicious circumstances, I had to pass it off to Homicide.

There were stacks of cases of people who managed to survive into their twenties while trying as hard as possible to kill themselves through drugs. Now and then, some civilian, who obviously ditched their spouse, would disappear. In my first month, only one case interested me: a missing priest in his seventies. I was surprised that this case fell to me and wasn't viewed as a higher priority, being connected to a local church.

The holy misper was named Father Charlie Rhodes. He was from St. Dominic's which was within walking distance from the precinct. He had vanished into thin air, and his fellow clergy hadn't been very helpful. As I understood it, he was the parochial pastor, not the head of the church but an elderly number two. His boss, the monsignor, seemed to be annoyed by Father Charlie, but I couldn't tell if it was personal or he was pissed off by the inconvenience of a staff member disappearing.

I was shown Father Charlie's basement studio in the rectory at the side of the church. It was neat and sparse. Everything seemed in order. I ran my eyes over the lone crucifix on the otherwise bare walls, the small, old-school tube TV with antenna, the half-filled bookcase with a stack of *People* magazines, and a decades-old photograph of a young man with a shag haircut. There wasn't much to put out of order.

I sighed. It was depressing. I figured God would want his staff to enjoy themselves at least a little. "Has he lived here long?"

"About five years."

"Any idea who he was meeting or where he was headed?"

"He told me he was going out for a walk. I assume on his own. He might have been meeting with one of our parishioners, but he

would usually let me know. As an older priest, he mostly spends time in contemplation and helping out with the services. I checked with Constance the next day when he didn't return to see if he called in or if she had talked to him before he left, but he hadn't and she didn't."

"Constance?"

"She works in our office."

"Did he do that often?"

"No. I mean, he'd leave now and then to run errands, but he was always back in the parish by nighttime. I don't recall him ever not being here since he's arrived. When I realized he hadn't returned the following morning, that was when I called the police."

"Did he seem nervous or different in any way lately?"

"Not particularly. If I would have known something like this was going to happen, I would have been paying closer attention."

The list of parishioners he might have visited was slow in coming, as were any other church files on Father Charlie. While I waited, I caught an unsolicited call from another cop, Brian Vargas who worked the 17th Precinct in Manhattan. He had a missing priest case, too. Our cases had matched in the misper database. One of us would call the other every day or two just to check in since the cases were similar.

"Anything new?" I asked. I was getting ready to wrap up for the day.

"Nah. Typical shit. I feel like the priests are jerking me around. I go in there and I talk to a few of them and they answer some basic questions but never have anything specific. The monsignor doesn't seem to want them to talk to me. Maybe the missing priests were pervs, and they sent them off somewhere before any charges came."

"Maybe, but then why the hell alert us that they are missing?"

"Good question. No priors on your guy, right?" Brian asked.

"Nope. I'm stuck. You played the Catholic card, right?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't have passed any tests if they gave me one,

though. One of the priests offered to pray with me, but in terms of going over the misper's past, forget it," Brian said.

"Yeah, I got a similar vibe, but I thought it was because they view me as a total lost cause."

"You never know. A young, gay cop? They might really want to save you. Or God knows what else." Brian laughed. Not at me, at them, I assumed.

I laughed, too. I had gotten in the habit years ago of letting people know early on that I was gay. It prevented me feeling duty bound to bring it up when someone called another officer a "fag" or something like that. "Anyway, let me know if you find anything."

"All right, Eddie. You also."

As I was getting ready to leave, John, one of the people I liked the most back when I was in Anti-Crime, stopped by, insisting I get a beer with him at Pauline's. Like the last five generations of cops before us, Pauline's was our watering hole of choice.

"Okay," I said. "I can use a drink or ten."

"One of the old guard, Sandy, is up from Florida."

"Oh yeah. I think I met him briefly once, a while back."

"Get ready for Fort Apache in the eighties' war stories."

John had always been nice to me ever since I joined Anti-Crime years ago. Initially, I thought he might be interested in me. Then one Friday I met him for a drink, and he was there with a girl. "Girlfriend?" I asked. "Yep, we've been dating for a couple years now." Not the response of someone who was still trying to figure things out. Regardless, I enjoyed hanging out with him. It was better than going home and feeling sorry for myself.