



Custody

Installment Eight
June 2024

Epilog

Epilog

Wednesday

December 30, 1992

Danny Hart seldomly threw parties. But this end of the year event was a true exception, called for by a momentous year. His first-floor office space was adorned with streamers, beneath which were set out a rented bumper pool table, ping pong table, and, his favorite, an air hockey set up. The kids would have a blast, he thought as he checked it once more, the night before. And there was still plenty of open space required for guests to mingle and 'get about' as he chose to think of it.

Gabriella Costa had visited one day earlier in the month, as a favor that Danny had requested, when he was having a neighborhood caterer come by. He was so pleased that Gabs interpreted what he thought he wanted, corrected it for the anticipated assemblage of several age groups, and chose appropriate hot and cold foods in proper quantities from off the wide-ranging Jersey City menu. They avoided Christmas holiday appearances, because it was a whole year celebration, not a duplication of the many yuletide parties that people had been attending. It was a happy-and-sad affair, and reds and greens and bells and fir trees just wouldn't fit what, for some, would be a bittersweet occasion.

It was quite remarkable that of all the social butterflies and young people to be invited, it turned out to be the 'old, semi-retired guy'—Danny Hart—with whom most of them kept in touch in the intervening months since the autumn custody hearing. For him, it was quite affirming.

Perhaps the most touching was the evening he received a phone call from Rosalyn Lowry, inquiring about his friend, The Flash. Might he reprise a magic carpet ride to help them transport Linda's father home to the Lowry

condominium from the rehab center, where Myles thrived, and blossomed, in the five weeks before Thanksgiving. That homecoming weekend was no storybook ending, for sure. But the three Lowrys were all trying their best. And no one could have asked for more. Rosalyn certainly wasn't raising false expectations in the reconstructed Lowry household.

Even the expats in Linda Lowry's circle kept Danny apprised of their new lives overseas by occasional letters. And the bulletin board in the Myles's bedroom had a few picture postcards from other continents.

He finished straightening out the kitchen from his morning. The new elevator tone sounded from the floor below, an improvised doorbell he had installed to let him know someone was about to visit and needed him to open his apartment level inner door. Even in this new incarnation, Danny still retained some of his security instincts.

When he opened the door, The Flash stood before him. "Need anything before I head out for the day?" he asked.

"No thanks, I think you covered everything. That extra refrigerator downstairs was a great idea for the party," Danny told his friend.

Flash told him, "You never can have enough cold drinks on hand. And I bet some of your guests will show up with food or a special home-made dessert to keep cold, even though you told them you had it all under control."

Danny mixed a question and a statement, "You and your guys aren't working late today, are you? You can't miss the party, Flash."

"Oh, no. There's just a lady who wants things rearranged in her house before the New Year. I need only one of my guys to help with heavy lifting and repositioning something special we delivered and installed there several weeks ago. My family will be down for the party at noon, and I'll follow along. I wouldn't miss it. Don't worry, Danny." With that, the carriage door slid across and he was on the move.

By eleven o'clock, the place was stirring. Some of the kids from the building, too excited to wait for noontime, were already playing air hockey and scurrying after ping pong balls that went awry from a high energy volley.

There were open soda cans on the floor below the tables so they wouldn't spill or get knocked over.

The caterer arrived right on time at a quarter after the hour. Within a half hour, between the caterer and some of the moms from upstairs, the food was spread out and ready for guests. It wouldn't rival Yvonne's spread that fateful evening on the **HAPPYDALE** quad, but it was certainly perfect for this day late in December, ready to welcome in, to quote Valerie McKinley's mantra: A new year . . . A new life.

The Christmas present in Danny's pocket rang. He flipped down the cover to expose the keypad, as Detective Howe had taught him to do, "Hello?" He still wasn't ready to change that greeting, yet.

"Mr. Hart, the first van is here. Should I open the gate?" It was one of the teens from the second floor, rear apartment, whose window looked out on the alley and Danny's driveway. He was already thinking of how to spend his half of the twenty dollars he was getting for this 'special surveillance task' for 'Investigator Hart.' His mother would get the other half for his bank savings.

"Yes, thanks. I'll go down to meet them," Danny told him.

So, he depressed the remote clicker while waving out the window and the garage door below began to rise. Danny stepped out of the elevator and pressed the **DOOR OPEN** arrows. He walked across the garage floor, directing his friend to pull up as far as she could, next to his car. They would need some more room for others he was expecting.

Gabs got out from behind the wheel, as her mother's companion stepped from the back seat behind her. Danny got a great big hug from Costa, who remotely popped the trunk to get access to the folded wheelchair within. With a smoothness garnered from much practice, Mama Costa's companion had the chair out of the trunk, opened, and was wheeling it to the passenger side rear door of the sedan. In what seemed to Danny to be a very short time, Gabriella's mom was lifted from the car and gently arranged, under her lap blanket, in her mobile chair and was, as she told him herself, "ready for a party."

"We'll all fit. There's plenty of room," Danny told them as they approached the elevator. Mama Costa was thrilled to see the arrangements when the elevator door slid open to reveal the games, and food, and young people moving about.

Her companion rolled her out onto the floor, stopping at the threshold to tell Danny, "Thank you for inviting me today. I must tell you that I have not seen Mama Costa so excited in quite a long time. And don't worry afterwards if I move her to a corner while she seems to have drifted off for a nap. I can assure you that she will be dreaming of parties from her youth as she does."

Danny told her, "Don't you forget to have a good time, too. Okay?" As he placed an affirming hand on her shoulder.

"This is terrific, Dan. It looks fabulous. Did the caterer get it all correct?" asked Gabs.

"I think so. You take a spin around and see what you think. After all, it's your handiwork, you know," he said as he ushered her gently with a hand on her back.

And with perfect timing, his Motorola MicroTAC rang again. "Hello?"

"Second vehicle, Mr. Hart. Okay to let it in?"

"Sure thing, thanks." He stepped back into the elevator and lowered the carriage.

Howe and Flynn stepped out of the borrowed medical van, after Flynn swung it alongside Costa's car. It fit into Danny's high door with a lot more room to spare than it did most garages. He greeted each of the women as they stood by the rear double doors of the specialty vehicle. "Quite the ride, here, Angie," he commented.

"On loan from the rehab. They'll call if they need it back for an emergency," she told him as she opened the doors. Howe hit the button to unfold the ramp and then walked up into the interior compartment. It could take two chairs, so she had a way to go inside to reach the floor lock releases.

Hart stood aside as she walked backwards down the ramp with her special passenger.

"Hello there, Danny. Thanks for the invite. I could use a good party. And I'm off the heavy meds a week, just Tylenol now, so this will be my first chance for a cold beer in months."

"Mike, you're looking even better than two weeks ago. I'm really glad you decided to come." They shook hands and the ladies gave them time together by walking over and using the elevator to go upstairs. Howe was familiar enough to make her way. She had her keys back, and had been here five times over the last two months, debriefing Hart and getting what she needed to prepare the district attorney for Marie Aello's pending trial in the spring.

Hart rolled Mike over to a folding chair by the opened bank of surveillance video screens. Mike looked at the switching images, "Looks like party central up there, Danny. And your street's really hopping."

"Yeah, well, you know. Old habits and all . . ." he let it drift off.

"Miss it?" asked Riley.

"Some. But I'm adjusting. I spend more time with the building. The tenants never complained, but there was some stuff I should have tended to better. Mostly on their floors. I let respect for their privacy get in the way, I guess. But I'm almost caught up now. Gives me something to do, most days. What I can't do, I hire Flash and his guys to see to. Turns out I see them more. We were always on good terms, objectively; but now we're almost a little community. Some of them know one another better than they gave themselves time to do before. I wouldn't have even thought to invite them to this party, if I was still coming and going for cases." If he was talking to a priest, Danny might have expected absolution came next.

"What about you, Mike? Things getting any better?" Danny almost hesitated to ask. But his openness about his own situation seemed to make it at least appropriate, even if not easier.

"Days are longer at home than at rehab. Fewer structured activities. Less people around, speaking of coming and going. I really miss the dog. A lot.

I used to talk to him. He always kept up his side of the conversation. We didn't argue much. And when we did, he went over to the door to say we needed to go for a walk and get some fresh air." Riley looked sad.

Danny wasn't having that, though. This was a party day. "Let's go up and have that cold beer, Mike. Some people I'd like you to meet. And some friends you haven't seen in a while, I'd guess."

"Kind of you to put it that way, Danny. I just wasn't up for company from those nice ladies while I was struggling to get good enough to come home," he said, in a confession of his own. "Deciding to take them up on their offer to bring me today was a big step. Especially for me and Howe. I really need to see to it that she stops beating herself up about my dog. Your party today will help, Danny. You're a good man, sir." He put out his hand to shake again. This time not in a reflex social greeting, but to seal a far more complex and lasting bond—forged on the anvil of their advocacy for Linda Lowry.

As predicted, a half hour later, Mama Costa was over in a corner, dozing off and several times almost dropping her solo cup of ice water. Her doctor would be shocked to know she had cajoled her companion to add 'just a few drops' of Johnnie Walker Red from Danny's adults only table, the caterer carefully staffed with the local school resource officer.

Around their own corner round table, with Mike's wheels nestled in neatly, sat a modern-day counterpart of Lady Guinevere's lords and ladies, assembled in the service of Lady Linda: Riley, Hart, Howe, Flynn, and Costa.

"Eleanor said she would be a little late, her ride wouldn't be getting to her house until a little before noon," said Gabs.

"Who's giving her a ride?" asked Dan.

Gabs replied, "She wouldn't say. She's been a mystery since we resigned. Maybe she's got a guy. I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Not for long, apparently." It was Howe who recognized the car that was just pulling up in front. The tenants' teenage friends had seen to it that a few spaces directly in front of the building were still available for partygoers.

The three of them looked like what those same kids would call a 'posse.' And how right they would have been. Eleanor Quatrane was the first through the street door into the party area. Right behind her, flanked shoulder to shoulder, were Maura and Frances, not wearing their police uniforms from Myles's and Rosalyn's childhood hometown.

"You said not to bring 'anything' for the party," stated Quatrane. "But you didn't say 'anybody'—hope you don't mind Danny. But I still just love surprising you."

Danny was very surprised, and pleased. "Well, as I live and breathe . . . Maura and Frances, come in, come in."

"You better," said Frances.

"What?" asked Hart.

"What you said . . ." chimed in Maura.

Followed by Frances repeating, "Live and breathe . . ."

He stepped in between them and wrapped each one over the shoulders with an arm apiece. "It's great to see you. How have you been?"

"A lot quieter and peaceful since you left town. That's for sure," said Hammersmith. "Our captain says to say hello. He assigned us to this special detail—to check up on all of you."

"Yeah," said Frances. "He wants to make sure you are not coming back to our hamlet anytime soon on business. But says you're all welcome anytime for any other reason . . ."

Maura finished his two conditions, ". . . except to come by train to open a bank account."

They all laughed, and Danny guided them over so he could make introductions all around the table. "I'll slide in a few chairs. There's plenty of room. Go get a drink and come back right away."

Urged on by Flynn's piercing side-eye and two shakes of her head, Howe went over to Riley and, pointing at his bottle on the table, asked him, "Mike, can I get you a fresh one?" She didn't realize that Riley, who still didn't miss much, had also seen Flynn's dispatch.

"That would be great. And, listen, bring your drink over here when they push more chairs in. Flynn's a big girl. She doesn't need you holding her hand." And so began Mike Riley's next step to recovery.

They all squeezed in, except for Flynn, who saw the détente under way and wrangled her way into calling "winners" for the next air-hockey game. A few minutes later, when Flynn let out a whoop for her first goal, Riley leaned over to Howe and said, "See, I told you she'd be all right."

The detective issued a non-committal, 'yup,' and took a long sip of her own bourbon on the rocks.

To which, Mike Riley replied, "And you know, detective, you and I should be, too. My black and blues are all gone. Time is, yours should be, too." They were in their own silent bubble amidst the noise of the party. "How about we raise a toast to that wonderful old friend of mine?" He held out his long neck and she clinked her glass to it.

She did not have anything she could say. But he kept talking, "I didn't get to thank you, you know."

"For what?" she couldn't imagine, or at least didn't want to.

"Caring for my dog when I couldn't. I heard what you did for him." He took a pull on his beer. "But mostly, for watching over me in the hospital. It was touch and go that first night. Knowing you were on vigil was what helped me pull through."

"But you were out like a light, Mike." She was recalling those long hours.

"Detective Howe, you would be absolutely astounded by what you can perceive from that dark place. My prayer, well one of them for you, is that you will never have to find that out for yourself." He looked at his bottle and decided against another pull just then.

"It's Dee, Mike," was all she said.

"What is?" he asked.

"My first name," she confided.

"Didn't know you had one," he said, only half-joking.

"Not many people do. My desk sergeant—though he's sworn under pain of a brutal round of the silent treatment, not to utter it to anyone. And my family. Though they don't like the shortened version."

"Deborah?" he asked in a whisper.

Also quietly, she told him, "I don't particularly care for Deborah. Too much of a legend to live up to."

"Surprisingly enough . . . Dee, if I may? . . ." and he continued when she nodded . . . "since today seems made for revelations, me and my dog liked reading the Bible together. Me in my armchair by the window and him on his bed on the floor." He did sip a half mouthful then. "That's what we argued most about. God." He made sure she was not put off by his recollecting the dog. She didn't seem to be, so he kept going, "Anyway, that Deborah was quite a woman. But from where I st . . . sit . . . I think you're up to the challenge."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Riley," she stated in mock-formality. Her glass was empty. She said, holding it up, "Well, look what happened here. I think my glass had a hole in it. While I remedy that, is there anything I can do for you, Mike?"

"Yes, but in about a week or two," he told her.

"What's that? Name it," she said.

"Keep me posted on your off-day schedule, if you would. I might need a companion to stretch my legs one day a week walking up the hill to the pocket park two blocks up from my apartment. And to make sure I don't topple down the stairs the first couple of times I try them with my new cane."

Making her way to the adults only table, she told him, "I'll drink to that." She stopped and looked back. "And, Mike, ask my desk sergeant when you call me at the station. He'll tell you there are few things in this world worse than my silent treatment."

He raised his still half-filled bottle and declared, "Mum's the word."

But the young man over at the air hockey table was anything but mum. "You win, lady. You're too good!"

As at all parties, things quieted down as the buffet table got conga'd by young and old alike, and people took chairs at tables where they could find them. Some kids sat on the floor, their backs supported by the wall and their legs crossed into lap tables of their own making, with drink cups resting against the inside of their bent knees. Gabs and her mom and her mom's companion were at a small square table, now that Mama Costa had awoken from her pleasant reveries and was ready to eat.

At the round table, it was time for quiet conversation for most to listen and few to talk

Maura asked Eleanor, "What became of Attorney Soro after you and Gaby resigned voluntarily?"

Quatrane related a quick version, short of many details, having missed them first-hand. "She stayed on. She needed the law firm platform for what she still had a mind to do."

"What was that?" asked Frances.

"Well, she knew that your people would take care of LeClerc for Myles and that the feds would do whatever they wanted about the bank proceeds. She knew that Detective Howe and her DA would see to Marie Aello. But she still was bothered about Ned Hegerman's legacy. Not so much the money, because she did not want to disturb Linda's education. But the idea that he defrauded partners, and the firm was just something she could not let go. And the way the current partners railroaded the four attorneys who were fired and could not find work for a long time stuck in her craw."

“So, what did she do?” now Howe was intrigued; partly out of curiosity and partly in case any of it worked into her case against Aello.

“She dug back into the SEC approval of the long-ago acquisition. She went after records she eventually found in a depository that was not the one that Mrs. DeWitt provided for her study. She apparently kept her word to that old woman, through it all; even went as far as verifying during the hearing resolution that neither Mellon nor Lowery ever heard of her.” She turned to evaluate some shouts of ‘net’, ‘net,’ over at the ping pong table.

Continuing, Quatrane related, “But she made no such promises about Mellon’s father or to their distant cousin, Joshua Winston. Turned out somehow the weak link in that chain became the niece, Missie. She is now no longer working at the Riverdale Sanitorium and is busy serenading attorneys at the DA’s offices in Jersey and New York about the files that were housed in a basement storage area in that facility. Karidja left it in their hands when she departed, figuring that she had done enough.”

“Departed?” asked Frances.

Quatrane looked across to their host and implored, “Danny? You want to take that?”

He did. “The last package, her third, I received from Karidja came from her new place in Ivory Coast. She is now working as a conflict resolutionist for issues stemming from the recent Civil War. Those battles closed off her schooling and led to her seeking asylum here in the States to finish her law degrees and certifications. She promised me details in her next correspondence, but her quick note accompanied a timely shipment I still have to deliver to its ultimate destination.”

Flynn came over, a plate of food finally arranged to have after her hockey championship, in time to hear about Karidja. So she asked the table, “Speaking of overseas, what is the latest on Oulette and Smith?”

“We can do those,” said Maura. “The doctor was shunned by her practice, due to the bad publicity suggesting she was in cahoots with the felonious oncologist. She checked in at the stationhouse and made sure the county or state had no pending charges or investigation against her. She was assured there were none. When I asked her why she wanted to know, she

made it clear she did not want to have any fugitive tag on her passport. She told me she was going back to see her grandfather in France, who had a dying wish for her to fulfill.”

Then Frances contributed about Smith. “I got to like April over the course of time. She was a crackerjack archivist and a very able internet researcher. For all that, she was not much interested in people her own age or the social scene on Long Island. Don’t get me wrong, she was extremely friendly—too friendly in one case—but did not commit to many friendships. She was led astray by LeClerc, seemingly quite easily, but it was far more complex than that. And her loyalty to Myles became almost self-destructive. You saw it, right? She also was mauled in the tabloids. They turned her compassion into lust; her being a material witness into revenge.”

Another game-related outburst echoed the solid knocking of one billiard ball against another. Then came the finale to Frances’ update. “She was devastated and felt betrayed by law enforcement when she was kicked out of the safe house with ten minute’s notice. She had nowhere to go. Long and short of it, she got an offer from Oulette to go to France and work on the sanitorium the grandfather was starting. She wrote each of us a letter weeks later, after calming down. She told our captain he could let her know if it was necessary to return for LeClerc’s trial and she’d figure out at that time how to make it happen, asking him—in typical April fashion— ‘for the customary two weeks’ notice.’

A contented quiet came over the group. The kids attending were on a game break and were back to the buffet for another round. Suddenly, the window behind Danny began to vibrate. A loud beat and pounding sound filled the air, because one of the teens keeping the sidewalk parking available had opened the door. “Company coming, Mr. Hart,” he called in.

The group at the table could almost not hear his message. Out the window they saw a massive black Chevy Suburban pull into the curb. This was the source of the pandemonium. It was Steppenwolf inviting everyone in deafening decibels to come along for a magic carpet ride. Howe stood and said, “Not in my precinct. That’s just too loud . . . ”

But Danny stepped in, laughing almost to tears. “Wait, wait. You’re not going to believe this. I know. He lives here. Upstairs.” And then the guests of

the round table noticed the youngest kids had run out to the sidewalk and were dancing and screaming the words aloud.

The passenger door of the huge vehicle opened and, inexplicably, a paradoxically small-sized girl emerged. To their joint amazement it was Linda Lowry. All decked out in a party dress. She saw Danny Hart come out of the building and ran to him, jumped up into his awaiting arms, and gave him the tightest hug she could muster. "We made it. We made it. We're not too late, are we?" she urgently needed to know.

"Nope. You are what they call in the newspapers, 'tastefully late.'"

"Not too late for the food, I hope. Me and my dad are really hungry," she informed him.

And with that, the third and unexpected wheelchair of the day was opened and rolled out to the street side of The Flash's ride. No one inside at the party could see through the tinted windows, as Flash and one of his guys lifted Myles out of the vehicle and into the chair, while the teens who had been keeping the parking spot opened, now ushered cars coming down the street around the space needed for the transfer.

Unlike the prior two, this chair was mostly for comfort and security, not due to full disability. Myles demonstrated that when he stepped out of the chair and up the curb and then sat back down when Flash put the chair on the sidewalk proper. Myles supported himself just by a cane for those few moments. He smiled broadly in response to the applause that broke out.

There were endless questions he really could not fully comprehend or answer verbally just at first. But when that initial outpouring quelled and he was asked one thing at a time, he did very well speaking 'yes' and 'no.' For more he printed carefully on a small whiteboard tucked into the side of his chair when he arrived, but resting now on the table in front of him.

Danny Hart was so grateful to Flash, who told him, "The missus called me direct, like I told her she could when we brought him home from rehab last month. She kept it from the girl, too. She didn't want to 'disappoint' she said, if Myles was not up to coming this morning. I tell you; he has come a loong way in a five weeks."

They stood together silently, now that Steppenwolf had finished; watching the friends swarm him and his daughter. "Danny," Flash told him, "She said to say thanks for asking. But she's still 'adjusting' and wasn't up for a lot of questions. She still unsure of what people think of the whole 'escapade' and 'frankly, of me' was how she put it."

"Thanks, Flash. You're a good man," Danny said.

"Ironic . . ." he answered.

"What?" Danny asked.

"That's precisely what she told me to tell you." He laughed. "Come on, now, me and my man are hungry and thirsty. Lots of traffic for a Wednesday in a holiday week." He walked away and Danny felt a tug on his pant leg.

It was none other than "Me, your best little friend in the whole world," she informed him. "Can you help me get food for my dad? I'll tell you what he can eat. Please, get me a knife, too."

She guided him expertly along the buffet. She picked softer foods, that didn't need cutting. Macaroni salad and potato chips. Some dip, after she checked it wasn't too spicy. Baked beans. And when she got to the hot dogs and burgers on the platter, she took the dog out of the roll, cut it in bite-size rings to pick up with a fork, and left the roll on the side. She put a dollop of mustard for dipping. At the make-your-own-taco bar, she scooped some meat and veggies onto the plate and skipped taking the hard shell. "That's good for now. I'll give him ice cream later if you have some." She picked up the plate and asked him to bring along a soda in a cup, no ice.

It seemed to Danny that in this five week 'adjustment' period, Myles was not the only Lowry who had come a long way. She gave the plate to her dad and went back to make her own, without asking Danny for help. And when she had, she looked around and saw an open chair at a table with the younger kids from the apartments upstairs. She sat down without an invitation and said, "I'm Linda. Mr. Hart's a friend of our family. What's your names?" It didn't take long for them to be comparing notes about their schools and teachers and what they were learning there.

At the round table, the adults learned from Myles that Itzel and Bembe had visited. With a combination of shorter spoken words, some interesting charades and pantomime, and his whiteboard, Myles conveyed to them that the Cocombs had gone to eastern Europe and toured factories and hospitals. Many kids and parents were already benefiting from vaccinations, with thousands scheduled each week for more.

And then Myles did what most at the table thought was a curious thing to do. He inched up his sleeve and displayed an odd-looking bracelet. He wore a stylized rubber band on his wrist. It was broad and flat, with an erect tab in its center. Wordlessly, he held it up for Frances and Maura to see.

Maura nodded to Frances, who told Myles, "She's safe and sound. She went to France. She is still helping Françoise. At the grandfather's clinic." Short and sweet. No confusing details. Frances was so intuitively keen. Myles placed his hand over his heart in thanks.

It was Linda, arriving with ice cream for them both, that helped explain their living arrangements. Myles worked on his simple scoops of chocolate, adding once in a while to her narrative. Linda's vanilla had the decorative company of multiple colored M&Ms and hot chocolate fudge syrup. They all marveled at Myles's foresight about the new condominium, secretly purchased, without even Ned Hegerman's knowledge. Done so at a time when all Myles's planning ahead had only hope as a foundation, and he had a few scant months of visitation left on his expiring custody agreement. Before his wife had shown up rain-soaked on a summer Thursday with a birthday dinner invitation and hope-filled plans of her own.

"Our new house is in a tall building. And we have two floors." She turned to Myles. "What's the word, daddy?" He wrote 'duplex' on his whiteboard. "Yeah, that's it. A duplex. It means you have an up and a down." She scooped some ice cream and kept talking around the melting vanilla. "My dad stays downstairs, he has his own big bedroom, because steps are too hard still. My mom and I have bedrooms upstairs. Like in the stories, the ladies are up in the tower and the men are down below. But dad doesn't call us Rapunzel and our hair's not that long. Anyway, that's not real; it's just a fairy tale."

She took more ice cream. Some of the adults around the table, who knew of Rosalyn's 'penchant' for assimilating such story characters, exhaled a

sigh of relief. Myles smiled at Danny and made an 'okay' sign with the fingers on his 'good' hand.'

There was a ringing in Danny's pocket again. He was surprised, since he thought it was a little late for that. He amazed the table gathering by taking out the phone and saying "Hello." He pointed accusingly at Howe.

"I couldn't resist," she told them. "It drove me crazy having him searching all around for a pay phone. I gave it to him last week for Christmas. After all, I had promised it to him—even though he thought it might have been a threat."

"Yes. Let it in," he said.

"Who else is coming? I thought this was everybody?" he scanned the table and he only caught Maura looking at her watch. As he thought about it, he recalled she'd been doing that for the last half hour quite several times. He dismissed it, thinking she had to check in with her captain for shift change, or something. Nobody else made any guesses.

The elevator door opened and a very pretty woman with two girls, younger than high school age, stepped into the room. Linda put her spoon down to see who these girls were, besides new kids to play with at the party. Danny stood to greet them, and only then could see deeper into the elevator than the others could yet see from the table. The others started to rise and saw Danny shaking his head side to side and then he stretched his arms out spread-eagle to give the man coming out from the elevator a bearhug.

As they were about to come to their own realizations, Linda Lowry shrieked in joy. "You came. You came. And you brought your daughters." And then they all knew it was Dominic Corredor, a little worn out from driving in holiday traffic, but certainly none the worse for the wear.

Abundant confusion was the only phrase to describe the next eight minutes. Danny's tenants and their kids didn't know what to make of the melee. It looked either like a fight or a just a little less falling down than a championship NHL team colliding in a victory pile at Stanley Cup mid-ice. There were napkins and gloves and jackets and sweaters all over the floor, and even a chair or two tipped over. Two of the caterer's servers rushed over to protect Mike and Myles, before their wheelchairs were upset in the fray.

Mama Costa was safely out of danger without their shielding, but equally dazzled by the excitement.

When all the human pyrotechnics flared out, the Corredors were given both bathrooms upstairs on the top floor to freshen up after their four-hour drive. As they took turns, Dominic showed them where he stayed and slept, beneath the twin posters of land and ice he had told them about many times since coming home. He picked up the small box off the dresser that Myles asked him to bring back down when he came.

Back downstairs they chose some heated-up food from the buffet and a place to sit. The girls were very anxious to meet and talk to this girl Linda, who helped to bring their dad back home off the trains. As they ate, they heard her describing some other trains that were at her new home.

Linda picked up her narrative, "My mother took my train set away, well almost all of it." She saw Danny and Dominic's faces drop. "Oh, no! It's a good thing," she assured them. So did Myles with a 'thumbs up.' "She traded it in for a new and bigger set. We have it all on a special table in dad's big bedroom. The track layout is bigger but the train cars aren't. It's what you call HO scale. I can remember because she got it for us for Christmas. You know, like Santa—Ho, Ho, Ho." That got a big laugh. "And when we don't run the trains, sometimes we watch Thomas the Train on my dad's TV set."

"Dominic, I bet you can guess which part of the old train set we did not trade in," she said.

His daughters were not used to a child addressing their father by his first name. They were accustomed to 'Mr. Corredor,' or 'Detective.'" Only their mom called him by that name.

Dominic finished his bite of taco fillings and toppings; the hard shells were all gone. He said, "I bet I can, because, as you know, I am a detective." His daughters saw that this made all his adult friends laugh. "My detecting skills tell me that somewhere in your new home I could find the caboose from your first train set."

Her voice was gleeful, as Linda replied, "You are so right."

She turned to his daughters and said, "I keep it on a special shelf, with nothing else on it in my bedroom. It's a reminder of the first trains my dad bought me. They were a birthday present. And it helps me always remember that your dad saved me from a caboose at my old school."

And then she stunned them all, by telling the two girls she had just met for the first time, but felt like she knew for a while. "I am sorry trains took your dad away for so long. But I thank you for sharing him with me when I was lonely and first met him at a train . . . and when he kept me from dying in another one. It's no secret . . . your dad is my hero."

The amazing thing about coffee and desserts at a party is that they give people a chance to regroup. Danny stood watching Linda and the Corredor girls play some games of air hockey. They took turns taking penalty shots from the blue line, instead of challenging one another. It worked better when three were involved. And these new friends had no desire to compete for hockey, or for their fathers. The fathers sat and talked some over their cake and ice cream. Linda had the server cut Myles's cake into cubes, so he could scoop them up easily with his spoon.

As Myles was eating his cake, Danny came over and handed him the small box Dominic had retrieved from upstairs. "This is from a friend of yours, Myles," he told Linda's father. Danny had learned yet another thing from watching Linda. He had arranged the flaps of the box top so they were very easy for Myles to lift without resistance. Lowry reached in and lifted out a familiar, colorful stuffed mascot of the Côte d'Ivoire football squad. He pressed it to his chest and turned his eyes skyward. Walking away, Danny heard him saying "thank you"—not to him, but to their friend an ocean away.

Some time later, Danny stood in a corner after talking to Mama Costa and introducing her to Mrs. Corredor, whom he barely knew himself. When Gabs wheeled her mother away to bring her up on the elevator to use the larger bathroom in Danny's bedroom, Dominic's wife kept him in the corner by engaging him in a private conversation of their own.

"I suppose I should almost be jealous of you, Danny Hart," she said playfully.

"How's that, ma'am?" he inquired.

"Well, you got to have my husband sleep over sooner than I did after four years, you know," she confided.

"I'm glad you've been upstairs to see we had separate rooms, ma'am," he mentioned instinctively.

"Well, yes. There is . . . that," she offered, a little too sensitively.

"And how is that going, if I might ask? As a friend of course, not a creepy voyeur," he replied.

"After a first flurry, it's taking a while. Getting better, though," she looked at him with unsteady eyes.

"It hasn't been easy, you know," Danny noted.

"I know, he's had—" but Hart interrupted.

"No, ma'am, I meant for you," he corrected. "I know the Department will make sure he goes back to see someone. They're required by law and contract to do so. And they most likely want him on the job again. But, have they extended you the same courtesy?" he probed.

She looked blankly and had no answer for that.

"They should you know. If they had any sense. Or at least a heart. You've done the work. You've put in the time. You kept your family together. 'Mothers and daughters,' I was telling a friend the other day." He waited and then said. "What about his captain, his old partner,"—she looked surprised—"I didn't tell him. I only learned from Detective Howe recently."

She almost began to wet her mascara. Fortunately, she had a napkin from dessert still. Danny asked, "Can you turn to him to get the Department to help you get some counseling? Not marriage counseling. Just YOU counseling."

"I'm not sure," she finally answered him. "I see now why Dominic liked you, Mr. Hart. It takes a special person to talk to another man's wife like this and not get slapped in the face."

“Well, lots of witnesses and all. Kind of a buffer for taking a chance.” He told her, “If it’s too awkward, I’m sure Detective Howe could put in a word.” He paused, realizing only then what he hadn’t before. “And if it’s impossible for . . . some reason . . . please call me. I can find someone for you. I’m sure.”

“Why?” she questioned.

“Asked and answered. If you want to try to keep your family together still, and you need a hand doing it, then I owe it to Dominic, Linda owes it to your girls, and every family your husband ever found a missing person for owes it to you. It’s not pity, or sympathy, ma’am. Don’t take it like that. Think of it as purely transactional if that can move you to ask. If it comes to that, just call me. No sentiment. No strings attached. I know a lady who’s come into some cash over the years, and your husband just gave her back her daughter and her family. I’ll see to it that she’ll pay for counseling, and no one will ever know, even the counselor.”

“How about buying me a cup of coffee first and I’ll let you know about the rest?” she said as she smiled and made her way over to the caterer’s steaming caffeine urns.

A group at a time, partygoers came over to Danny expressing their thanks, wishing him a good New Year, and saying they had to hit the road before the traffic got worse.

Neighbors started drifting back upstairs, though some of the kids wanted to hang back and play more games. Their parents did not want to intrude and told them ‘no.’ When Danny heard, he said the table rentals were good until noon the next day, so anyone who didn’t have school and wanted to come down in the morning was welcome to do so, as long as people weren’t still trying to sleep and only tenants came in. That made leaving for some of them easier to take.

Danny offered the Corredors the top floor if they wanted to wait until the next day. As tempted as Dominic was, his wife said they would take a rain check.

The Flash came over, paid his respects all around, retrieved the Lowry pair more quietly than they had arrived, and departed to bring them back home to Manhattan.

Neither vehicle blocked one another in the garage, so it was fine that Gabriella and Mama Costa, and her companion were next to need help to leave. Some of the adult tenants and one of the caterer's guys who was bringing tables downstairs for pickup later went down to help.

After sitting around for a few postmortems about the pending Long Island and New Jersey prosecutions in the New Year, Angie Flynn shared a startling revelation from her court-buddy, Linda. "Linda and I had a lot of time to get to talk during your hearing, you know. I was fascinated to hear today that Mrs. Lowry bought them a train set for Christmas."

"Why is that?" asked Frances.

Flynn told the three cops still present, Frances, Maura, and Howe, sitting there with her and Danny and Mike Riley that "Linda told me she always thought her mother didn't like trains because they were something special Myles and she had, that her mother did not. But at Christmas when she gave them the new HO set to lay out on a specialized bench in Myles's bedroom, she said when she was a little girl, older men and ladies who were firefighters would sit around at backyard barbecues and tell stories about the horrible things they saw before she was born at a head-on train crash in her hometown."

Frances continued, "I recalled I read the newswire stories in the papers on the microfilm I searched after April fled. The eyewitness accounts were absolutely gruesome. It's no wonder a kid would have nightmares for life after hearing them over and over again."

All Danny could think to say again was, "Go figure, mothers and daughters."

Flynn chipped back in. "Well, I for one, was very happy to hear that Linda is reading to her dad a few pages every day. And that she knows she is not Rapunzel, up in some tower bedroom."

Custody: A Serialized Novel
June 5, 2024

Installment 8
Epilogue

The End