

Chapter XIII

From the third floor window of the rectory, Grimaldi could see the bush where the shot may have originated as well as the walk where Chris fell.

He could see the parking lot to the church where a blue and white cruiser sat, he presumed, providing protection from who knew what.

Protection.

He laughed.

It was more than this place could afford. The old brick building with fourteen-foot high ceilings and cracking plaster might hold up to a brisk wind, but if someone really wanted to get in, they wouldn't really have too much trouble.

They could start with the windows in the dining room. The windows began at the floor and stretched to the tin ceiling. No problems there.

He had checked the locks in the doors. There was some comfort in them. Each had a deadbolt, and each was at least an inch thick, solid oak. He also knew that they'd have to come out. One look and the fire marshal would have them replaced with something new and less hazardous.

Once St. Bernadette rectory might have been a haven. It had more an air of serenity than security, though; in better days it most certainly provided security. It was a church that promoted security, certainty: men dressed in black, forming an army for the Lord, living in fortresses built, most times, from the labor of immigrant populations. It was decadent, feudal, medieval, and straightforward.

It was a time when people knew their places.

But who and what were left?

Grimaldi laughed a nervous laugh.

He pressed his hand against the window, testing it. The glass was barely held in by the crumbling putty. He pushed on the frame. The window wouldn't budge.

Grimaldi pulled himself up on the broad window sill to check the lock. It was open. He looked closer at the frame and saw that it was locked into place by ruined varnish, stronger than paint.

He climbed down and clapped his hands together to get the dust off.

Back in his room, he started to unpack.

Why an old man would have to live in a place like this and worry about its upkeep didn't make any sense to Grimaldi.

Obviously, Father Fallon was overwhelmed by the task. At dinner, the old priest listed all the things that were wrong, beginning with the rectory, which needed a roof, new windows, a new furnace, and repointing.

The litany continued for most of the meal.

Grimaldi confirmed the part about the roof when he discovered water damage in his quarters.

The school was in pretty bad shape, too, the old man said. It was draining \$200,000 a year, mostly from collections. There was other money from the diocese.

“What I wouldn't do to get rid of that school,” Fallon told Grimaldi.

The people were aging. They'd given their best years to the parish. Most were now white haired old woman.

“They do their best to fill the collection basket. But what do they have? What do they have?”

The old man shook his head and ate his boiled potatoes, vegetables, and broiled skinless chicken. In between forkfuls, Fallon, who from what Grimaldi could see, had given his best years, too, sipped table wine and complained that he really shouldn't be drinking. Doctor's orders.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Beattie, scolded him several times for having wine with his meal, but with every solicitous pass, she refilled his glass.

“It's a shame about the boy,” Fallon said. “I suppose it was drugs.”

He paused and sipped from his glass.

“There weren't many kids that could be trusted nowadays. He was one I could trust. What a shame. Here was one boy that was picking himself up, making a better life for himself and his family, and look what happens.

“Not that anybody should be shot, deserves to be shot. I've thought about it, though. It's better this way, I mean, that he's dead. Imagine if he were simply maimed or had his leg shattered and he could never run again. Then, what would his life be like?”

“He was one of them he could trust. God bless his soul,” Fallon said.

Grimaldi asked who was meant by “them.”

“You know,” the priest said, “students.”

“Oh,” Grimaldi said.

“Yes, I suppose that he was making a drug drop, and he got caught in some kind of quarrel,” Grimaldi said. “Doesn't it frighten you that there's this kind of activity right outside your door?”

“No,” the old man said, “I’m as safe here as anywhere. And I can take care of myself. That night I was my night off, or maybe I could have helped.”

“I don’t see how,” Grimaldi said. “I was just around the corner and there wasn’t anything I could have done.”

Dessert was a small bowl of tasteless ice milk.

Mrs. Beattie brought the coffee.

“Then, again,” Fallon said, “things go on around here that I’m not even aware of. I don’t think I could be because they’d break my heart. An old man doesn’t need anymore stress. There is already too much heart break in growing old.”

Before the pastor excused himself and retired to the den to watch the evening news, he fumbled with creamer and salt shaker. Grimaldi thought it was some kind of signal. Maybe he should leave.

But Fallon stopped him.

“I’ve thought a little about the logistics,” the priest said.

He surprised Grimaldi.

“If the boy were killed here,” Fallon moved the salt shaker to the right of his coffee, “and you came from this direction, the shooter could have got out of there by going up the alley to Main Street, into the church — but that’s alarmed; into the rectory — but that’s locked; or waited. Anyhow, if the reports are accurate and what you say is true, the shot could have originated from here.”

He pointed to his coffee, meaning some bushes on the slope between the rectory and the school.

The old man paused.

When he spoke again, Fallon said, "There are some things I don't want to have to think about."

Grimaldi shook his head.

He didn't want to press Fallon.

"There are plenty of things I don't want to have to think about, either."

But he was curious.

"Where did you learn about guns?" he asked.

"I do a little hunting now and then," the pastor said and got up from his seat.

"News is on at 7. Never miss it."

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