

Beneath the Walnut Grove

Don Deveau

Chapter I

Three days before Christmas, in the Year of our Lord 1998. In a world that was wired and defined by the speed of its global connectivity and supersonic jets, he had to wonder at himself. Already two days had passed since he and his traveling companion had left from Halifax. Already they had changed trains twice. Now they were not moving at all—sidelined. Some problem on the tracks up ahead. No one was saying just what, but it would not have made for a bright spot in the future of the passengers on the Southbound. Outside, where the brightly-lit suburbs of Boston should be, there existed nothing but a blank white wall of Arctic bred snow. Inside, the lights were too bright, the chatter too loud, the air a little suffocating. None of this had the least effect upon his companion however, especially since he was lying in a box two cars back, in the baggage compartment.

In the window his reflection stared back at him with a haggard, almost demented look. The hair was a mess—and he never noticed all that gray before. The rumpled black suit didn't help and he badly needed a shave. He didn't even look like himself. There were way too many lines in that face, and puffiness under the eyes as well. At least the eyes were the same. And the cleric's collar added another bit of familiar to the likeness. But damned if he wasn't beginning to show a striking resemblance to the man in the box—his namesake and grandfather, the late Frank Martin. But at 98, that was twice the younger man's age. And if his own face was already showing signs... well, then it must be getting time for a bit of self-examination, he thought.

He remembered being fit and it did not seem all that long ago. When did he stop going to the gym, swimming, skating, doing *anything* that could be considered physical? He still maintained his discipline from his seminary days and remained faithful to the spiritual exercises (although lately, he had to admit a more apt description would be spiritual rituals). As for physical exercise, manipulating a laptop probably didn't count for much. Neither would sitting for hours on airplanes watching your feet swell. He hadn't set out to be a globetrotter, although he had already traveled around the world at least three times. And he wasn't even that comfortable about flying. But at the moment he would have preferred it to this nightmare ride.

The problem was that he had made a promise to an old man on his deathbed and a dying man's last wish is not a thing to be trifled with. And a promise to carry out a dying man's last wish—to the letter—was a matter of some gravity. And when a priest (even a Jesuit, the old man would have said) makes such a promise, it tends to take on the exaggerated solemnity of a vow. It becomes larger than life. But I'm not the one who is larger than life, he mused. It turns out that the old sinner back there in the box might be the one who has fooled us all. If only he hadn't been so stubborn about his distrust of flying—dead or alive.

He knew that he was being used of course. Calling for a priest on his deathbed, when he hadn't gone to Church in nearly 70 years. And not just any priest would do, oh no, only young Francis would do. And he knew damn well that young Francis would come in a hurry, no matter where he was in the world. Hop on the first available flight out of Singapore and spend the next 20 hours on planes, across an ocean and a continent. Still wearing shorts when he landed in a snowstorm at Halifax International Airport, he should have known then. Sleep-deprived, bewildered and suffering serious jetlag and climate assault, he should have stayed on the plane. Met by a young man who introduced himself as his nephew, he should have pretended to be someone else and just walked on by. He last knew the nephew as being a lad of eight or nine and

totally devoid of pierced body parts or tattoos at the time. And the drive to Grace Harbour—“back home”—was more terrifying than any plane ride.

His nephew, grown up since they had last met, was presumably old enough to have a driver's license. That he actually had been allowed one however was obviously an oversight by the issuer of such licenses. Driving through the dark night on treacherous icy roads, running through all the gears at every hairpin turn of the highway, was the boy's idea of great rollicking fun. Or perhaps he was just playing “scare the hell out of old Uncle Francis, the priest.” At least he was kind enough to turn down the stereo a notch, just enough to keep old Uncle Francis' head from exploding. Great driving music, huh? That's what he said. At least a dozen tapes, probably a complete collection: *AC/DC*. Great for driving a person mad thought Francis.

When they finally arrived at Grace Harbour and the house of his sister, Alice, it was after midnight, his head was throbbing and he felt rather ill. It had been a very long day.

It had been at least ten years since his last visit home, but Alice greeted him as if he had just returned from the corner store. “Francis! You look like you just saw a ghost. You're so pale, my dear. Have you been taking care of yourself? Come in and have a cup o' tea.”

He wanted to ask her when was the last time she had been the passenger in her son's car—or flown halfway around the world first and *then* taken a ride with her son. Instead he just smiled, reached out and hugged her and asked, “How have you been, Love?”

He was genuinely glad to see his sister. He always was. She was only a few years younger than him, but strangers would have guessed that he was many years her senior. She had aged very well—unlike some others of us he thought. Alice was the mother of the family. She had taken on the role at a very young age, soon after their mother had passed away. She was also the repository of the family's conscience. Which made it much easier for her siblings to float through life and shirk many shared responsibilities. No need to worry, don't have to bother, Alice will take care of things.

Just as she was taking care of their grandfather at the present moment. She had even given up hers and Charlie's downstairs bedroom to give the old man a “decent place to die.” Francis didn't know what Charlie thought of the idea, but the man had been married to Alice long enough to know better than to argue with her. Every ounce of her 110 pounds was pure concentrated headstrong stubbornness when she had her mind made up about something. She was also the most genuinely caring person that Francis had ever known.

So why was it that after a half-hour in her company, she always seemed to bring out the worst in him? Very likely it was mostly in his own mind—though certainly no less deserved—but she had a way of always bringing out the guilt in him. Not so much in what she said, she really only needed that look of hers. He could swear that their mother's spirit had passed into Alice when she died. He had loved his mother dearly and he still missed Rose every day. But one mother was enough and he wasn't looking for another one. He may need reminding of his sins of omission, like his latest ten year absence from the old homestead, but the reminding was not going to make one bit of difference.

It donned on him that his sister likely knew that, of course. It was like reminding Charlie not to forget his mother's birthday, or 101 other things. Charlie might remember or he might forget, depending on the kind of day Charlie was having. One thing was certain however: Alice's reminders went in one of her husband's ears and straight out the other. The same thing went for her son, Kevin. She would have to be a member of *AC/DC* to get through to the boy. But none of it mattered. It was just the way she was. In the latest jargon, it was the way in which Alice interfaced with the world around her. As a trait it was as much a part of her as her Jesuit

brother's collar. And it made her feel good about herself and right with the world. In other words, she was just doing the job she was made for. And motherhood was certainly as much a vocation as priesthood, was it not?

Francis declined the offer of tea but hinted that he wouldn't mind something a little stronger. But first he insisted upon seeing the old man, the object of his odyssey—the Holy Grail Himself. Alice poured him tea anyway, but fortified it with a generous dollop of white rum. With that he entered his grandfather's room, sat down at the dying man's bedside and began the next leg of his journey.

The room was in semi-darkness and it smelled of something that Francis could not readily identify: old people perhaps or antiseptic... maybe death? He heard the faint sound of snoring coming from the bed. This stopped abruptly when he laid his hand lightly on the old man's exposed arm. The other arm came over with a hand that gripped the younger man's wrist with a strength that would have been the envy of a professional wrestler. The familiar voice too was just as strong as Francis had remembered.

"I knew you would come," his grandfather rasped. "I knew that this would be an opportunity that you just couldn't pass up. Now, enough preliminaries. I don't have that much time. And don't forget... you are here as my priest, young man."

Francis nodded his assent, then whispered, "Good to see you again, too, you old goat."

"I heard that, Francis. Forgive me, but I never was much good at small talk. Now, do you have what you need... you know, the proper vestments, paraphernalia, whatever? Okay then... Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my last confession."

Thus began the strangest and longest performance of duty in his career as a priest and confessor. It would take the young Jesuit on a journey from which he might never recover. As he sat on the stranded train outside of a Boston suburb, with the snow swirling around outside and his grandfather's body resting two cars back, his mind began to replay the old man's words. All the while one part of his brain reminded him that, despite his three degrees in philosophy, business administration and law, and despite his sophistication as a world traveler, he had been no match whatsoever for old Frank Martin.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned" indeed! How can you hear a dying man's confession, then proceed to prescribe absolution when he refuses to repent? When he tells you that he committed murder not once but twice, then insists that he would do it all again, given half a chance? That killing those two men was no different than drowning kittens? That to understand he would have to bear with him—hear him out—and listen to his story that really began a long time before that fateful day.