

## CHAPTER I

MALACHY WATCHED ABE MOVE SLOWLY ACROSS THE FLOOR CARRYING a briefcase far too large for his short, round physique. Every year the briefcase got a little closer to the floor and Abe got a little crankier. Abe nearly bumped into an empty table because he was trying to count the house, including the back room, before he reached Malachy's office-booth. Malachy reached under the table, probing for the extra deep cigar box filled with supplier bills marked paid. He found it and placed it on the table just as Abe lowered himself into the booth and opened his briefcase. They looked at each other for a few seconds before exchanging greetings.

"You look well," Malachy said.

"I'd be better without the aggravation of this," Abe said, taking a sealed, brown-manila envelope from his briefcase.

"Nice to see you too, Abe. And I am well, thanks for asking."

"And you'd be better if that was a customer's," Abe said, pointing to a short glass of Jameson with a single melting ice cube. "Anyway, here's the report. Nothing has changed. And nothing will change if you don't fill some more seats."

Malachy took the report with one hand and flipped open the cigar box with the other and handed Abe the stack of paid bills. Abe placed them into a folder in his briefcase. Malachy put the cigar box with the unopened report on top of it under the table and braced himself for the lecture.

“And there’s one more thing,” Abe said. “Singer’s accountant called me. He wants to know what the prospects are for the monthly payment. That and Social Security are Singer’s only sources of income, and the cost of his retirement home just went up.”

“Tell him things look good and increase the payment to cover the higher nut,” Malachy answered.

Abe started to respond when Kevin, looking like a cross between a martial arts instructor and an affable bartender with a broad, charming smile, showed up at the booth with a half-full glass of schnapps. Abe looked at the glass, then up at Kevin and said, “So, he told you to bring that early. It won’t work. Sit down, I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

Kevin put the schnapps down in front of Abe, slid into the booth next to Malachy, and gestured for Abe to continue.

“Increase the payment? You should have been a politician. Revenues are down, so increase expenditures. Where’s the printing press? In the storeroom?”

Abe didn’t wait for any answers.

“I’ve been the Shamrock’s accountant forever. The Irish bar business used to work in this neighborhood. No more. Every year revenues go down, costs go up. So, one more time—close the Shamrock, sell the building, run your other business out of the apartment, and you’ll be money ahead, lots of money ahead.”

“Cheer up,” Malachy said. “Things are about to turn. We commissioned some high-powered MBAs to do an intense study of our market. Guess what? It turns out the Irish are now outnumbered, and not just on Devon but on the whole North Side of Chicago. I refused to change the Shamrock’s name but we are going to fully implement the rest of their recommendations. We’re adding curry, pot stickers, and tacos to the menu immediately.”

“So, now you’re a comedian. Good, you can make your living that way. You should close.”

“Anyway, there’s not enough room in the apartment for that,” Malachy said, pointing to the long bar Singer imported from Ireland because of its ornate, carved shamrocks.

“Why do you need the bar?”

“Where else can I brood about my enemies?” Malachy asked in his

best Yiddish joke-telling accent. “Anyway, my other business is booming. I’ll increase my rent payment to the Shamrock.”

“Wonderful,” Abe said, sounding weary. He turned to Kevin. “You see it every day. You know it’s not getting any better.”

Kevin, trying to suppress a smile, responded, “He does have a point about the bar.”

“You too! Why do I bother?”

“Because it’s your job,” Malachy said, reaching for his Jameson. “And you’re good at your job. Have the drink.”

Kevin, always alert to who was entering and leaving the Shamrock, focused on the doorway where an exiting regular customer was pointing out the booth to someone who just came in. He nudged Malachy.

Malachy looked up and saw a meticulously groomed man headed toward the booth. The expensive dark suit with a subtle stripe, starched light gray shirt with gold-coin cuff links, and muted tie almost seemed like a costume. The face was familiar from the newspapers. A politically wired real estate developer. Always leasing something to the state, county, or city. And somehow all the surplus property he acquired from the government turned out to have hidden value.

Kevin didn’t recognize the face and moved quickly from the booth to intercept the visitor. The man stopped and took a polite step back. Kevin—a solid 210-pound, six-foot three-inch block of muscle—did not step aside.

The man addressed Malachy, trying to talk over Kevin’s shoulder, which he just reached with the top of his head.

“Mr. Madden, could I speak with you in private when you are finished with your current business?”

His modulated tone was like a well-chosen fashion accessory. It enhanced the whole image of the smooth, suave, and urbane power player.

“No need,” Malachy said loudly. “You have my solemn promise that next month’s rent check will be on time.”

Mr. Fashion Plate smiled slightly and said, “This does not concern real estate. However, my work does require me to have a traveling office in my limo. May I suggest we meet there? It is very comfortable.”

“I know what you mean. Occasionally, my work requires private

meetings too. I have a somewhat uncomfortable space set aside in the storeroom for that purpose. However, there are some amenities. May I suggest we meet there?"

Mr. Fashion Plate smiled again, showing a little more of his cosmetic dentistry. "Since I'm requesting the meeting and I'm on your territory, the storeroom it is. I'll wait at the bar."

"Kevin, please serve our guest whatever he wants on the house."

"Coffee is just fine," Mr. Fashion Plate said, moving toward the barstools.

Malachy looked at Abe and said, "I promise I'll look at the report and consider your advice."

"That's what you said last month. Anyway, is that who I think it is? And you're making him meet you in the storeroom? Treat the man with some respect. Maybe he wants to buy for one of his developments. If he makes a good offer, take it. Some boom you're not having," Abe said, moving his open hand in a downward arc for emphasis. "Remember, I'm your personal accountant too."

"He already said it's not about real estate."

"So, what's it about?"

"I'm about to find out. See you next month, Abe."

Malachy led the way into the storeroom. Two dilapidated armchairs, a small wooden table, a floor lamp, and a cot, all surrounded by metal shelving full of bar and kitchen supplies. They settled into the chairs. Mr. Fashion Plate sat down without inspecting his chair for dust and dirt. A man on a mission.

"Mr. Madden..."

"Mister seems a little formal for our surroundings. How about Malachy?"

"Malachy, and please call me Dino. For some reason everybody calls me that... I suppose because my first and last names are almost three times as long. I'm here as the chairman of the Committee for Justice at the Mother Cabrini Shrine. We in the community call it the Saint Shrine. Are you familiar with the recent circumstances at our church?"

"I read the newspapers, usually a day late. I like my news properly aged."

"Then you know the basics. The rector-pastor has been suspended from his duties and ordered not to perform any public priestly functions pending the investigation and a resolution of a sex abuse charge by a young man."

"Lot of that going around," Malachy said.

"Too much. And very distressing. But in this particular case Fr. Bari is innocent."

"Of course," Malachy said.

Dino started to say something, changed his mind, and asked a question instead.

"Are you familiar with Fr. Bari's activities?"

"I know he's very popular in the Italian community."

"'Very popular' is an understatement. People are returning to church in droves. The church is packed to capacity at every Sunday Mass he celebrates. Even on weekdays the crowds are amazing. We are in constant trouble with the fire marshal. The traffic congestion and parking are worse than Soldier Field or Wrigley when the teams are winning. I've never seen anything like it."

"Must make for good collections," Malachy said, trying not to sound too cynical.

"Fr. Bari spends it on his causes as fast as we collect it. Have you read about his outreach efforts?"

"I remember reading there was some trouble with church authorities."

"Lots of trouble. Rome got involved. He has special services for divorced and remarried Catholics. Also for the gay community. When you walk into the church or one of the meeting spaces, God only knows who you might meet—Jews, Orthodox, Protestant Evangelicals, even gays with AIDS."

Malachy silently noted the "even" for the gays.

"At first, not everybody in the community approved of his outreach efforts. They thought the Shrine should just be about our heritage. But the force of his spirit just melted all opposition. He is a truly holy man, but he's canny and shrewd too."

Malachy pondered whether such a combination was possible. Then he thought of John XXIII. The Good Pope, as Italians called him, who neutralized the powerful and hostile Curia during the Vatican Council.

“Fr. Bari knows our community is the source of all the funds for his various projects, and he gives us lots of special attention with baptisms, marriages, and funerals. There were so many requests for the big three that Fr. Bari insisted we inaugurate a random system to determine his participation. It made the big donors very unhappy.”

Dino paused and made a rapid back and forth gesture with the thumb and forefinger of his raised hands, silently appealing to Malachy to validate the difficulty of working with someone who ignored how the world really worked. Malachy gave an impassive look back. Dino continued, “Anyway, Fr. Bari made the system a success. And the money kept flowing in.”

“And now all the good works have ground to a halt?”

“Yes. Our committee is very concerned that a grave injustice is about to be done. We know that Fr. Bari is completely innocent, but it would be very convenient for the archdiocese and Rome if somehow he was forced from his office and silenced.”

“Sounds like you need a good canon lawyer.”

“We already have that, here and in Rome. What we need is someone who can prove Fr. Bari’s innocence in such a way that the only possible outcome is his full restoration with no restrictions. Otherwise we’re concerned the church bureaucrats will win a war of attrition. And we are very concerned that Cardinal O’Grady is no friend of the Shrine and certainly no friend of Fr. Bari. There are frequent run-ins about his activities.”

“Not a good man to have as an adversary,” Malachy said.

“We understand you know the cardinal personally.”

“Too true. We grew up in the same neighborhood. Our mothers were best friends. We were forced to play together as boys.”

“Then you understand what we are up against.”

“A brilliant, calculating, cold-hearted prick,” Malachy said. “No doubt he has already selected the wasteland where he’s going to bury Fr. Bari. Speaking metaphorically, of course.”

“That is what we are concerned about and why I’m here. The committee would like to employ you to prove Fr. Bari’s innocence. We understand you sometimes undertake unusual projects.”

“What else do you understand?” Malachy asked.

“That you’re willing to use unorthodox methods to secure a successful outcome in the projects that you undertake. That those projects usually involve people from your old neighborhood. That you keep your word. And that your late wife, Maria, was Italian and very active in our community.”

Malachy winced when Dino said Maria’s name. It always made him angry when strangers used her first name instead of just a euphemism like “your late wife.”

Dino stopped talking when he saw Malachy’s reaction.

“Anything else?” Malachy asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep the anger from his voice.

“I only meant...”

“Move on. I’m over it.”

“You sometimes work with two associates. A retired professional burglar and former client named Leon Latalski nicknamed the Count. And your coworker and close friend Kevin, a fellow Vietnam veteran, who is totally loyal to you. Kevin was your chief investigator when you were still practicing law.” Dino paused and then said, “There is more. I can go on.”

“No need unless you know something about me that I don’t know.”

Dino smiled and shook his head no. “The committee has authorized me to offer you \$2,000 per day, inclusive of your expenses, to act as a consultant in our efforts to prove Fr. Bari’s innocence. If you accept our offer, I have a check for \$50,000 with you as the payee to act as a retainer.”

“Why me? Your community can handle this on its own.”

“As I said, Fr. Bari is shrewd and knows the community well. He has explicitly warned us that if any intimidation, threat, or force is used against his accuser, he’ll immediately resign and ask the cardinal to close the Shrine. We have assured him that none of that will happen and that the committee will hire a disinterested professional outside the community to do its investigation.”

“That answers why you went outside the community. Why me?”

Dino looked down and made a slight adjustment to his left cuff link before he answered the question. “Your potential selection was somewhat controversial within the committee. But, a major donor to our

group, who wishes to remain anonymous and entirely in the background, strongly recommended you and, through me, made a very persuasive argument that you are exactly the right man for the job. The final committee vote was unanimous.”

“Do I know this person?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. Will you accept our offer?”

“What’s the rest of it?” Malachy asked.

“The rest of it? I don’t understand.”

“You have more to tell me.”

“How did you know that?” Dino asked with genuine surprise.

“You told me—body language.”

“Oh,” he said quietly.

The idea that his scrubbed, rubbed, oiled, tanned, manicured, twice-a-week trimmed, and sartorially perfect body was telling things without his permission was a shock to Dino.

“We all do it,” Malachy said.

He handed Malachy a cell phone.

“It’s preprogrammed. Just press one and hold it down for a few seconds. I’ll wait for your answer in the bar.”

Malachy waited for Dino to leave and pressed one.

A low, distorted voice said, “Hello, Malachy. Are you by yourself?”

“Yes, all by my lonesome in the storeroom, talking with somebody I don’t know.”

There was a soft chuckle in Malachy’s ear.

“You made Dino meet with you in the storeroom? Good for you. Did he make you wrap the chair in silk before he sat down?”

“He accepted the accommodations without complaint.”

“Amazing. Let me introduce myself. I am the nameless donor to the committee and will remain anonymous in our interactions. You know me indirectly. I approved the settlement of Singer’s gambling debt many years ago. I admired the way you handled that and have followed your career ever since. I have directed various clients to your practice and have always found the results satisfactory.”

Malachy realized the voice was coming through a filter. A cautious, careful potential employer.

“Thanks for the referrals, I think.”

“You’re welcome. As to the current business, there is a success fee that goes with the assignment. Success is easily defined—Fr. Bari is found innocent and restored to his full duties at the Shrine.”

Malachy stayed silent.

“Your choice: assistance with reinstatement to the bar or a \$150,000 payment. You can choose after the fact.”

Malachy’s body language was not subtle. He almost fell off the chair. Reinstatement could ultimately be an Illinois Supreme Court decision. He clamped his mouth shut.

“Of course, I can’t guarantee the reinstatement. Too many variables. I can guarantee the \$150,000. It has to be one or the other, for obvious reasons.”

Malachy said, “I do have two questions.”

“Go ahead.”

“Is this business or personal for you? And why?”

There was a long silence.

“I understand why you want to know, and I will answer your questions. But, this information is only for you.”

There was another pause and then the voice went on.

“The matter is personal. I no longer have any business interests in Chicago. Some years ago, in what appeared to everyone else as a hopeless situation, Fr. Bari intervened and basically saved the life of an addicted family member. He kept my family intact, and I owe him for that. It is a debt of honor. There is one other thing you need to know. Any attempt to find out who I am is totally unacceptable and will terminate our relationship. And now it is decision time. Will you accept our offer?”

Malachy started to answer, hesitated, and then paused, thinking about how the word “terminate” came with a special tone and emphasis despite the filter. Then he thought about the juice Singer paid coming back with interest to help support him.

“Yes, I accept.”

“Good. Hold for a minute.”

Malachy waited.

“Dino has left the bar. He gave Kevin an envelope for you. It contains the check and all of Dino’s contact numbers. Report to him once

a week on your progress. Call him with any normal requests for information, facilitation of interviews, things like that.”

“Okay.”

“For anything unusual, use the cell phone you were given. It is pre-programmed with five more numbers. Use each one only once. On the first call, tell whoever answers, ‘This is Malachy. I need some information.’ I will call you back on that cell phone. You’ll be given a new formulation for the next call. Use that exact formulation. Don’t attempt to change any settings on the phone and don’t lose it.”

“Understood.”

“Your assignment is to prove Fr. Bari innocent. Anything else you find out about Fr. Bari that is not relevant to proving his innocence, keep it to yourself.”

“Of course,” Malachy said with conviction.

“Good luck.”

The cell phone clicked off. Malachy decided luck was not the issue.

Another problem—personal is always more dangerous than business. For everybody. Fr. Bari was either innocent of the accusation or not. That issue was already decided. If not, the high horse of holiness had thrown another rider. And that would be a major problem. The new employer definitely did not want a riderless horse. And Malachy knew the nameless voice expected those in his employ to provide what he had paid for.

“Well, Abe, business is booming,” Malachy said softly to the empty room. “Now all I have to do is to keep it from boomeranging.”

## CHAPTER II

MALACHY STARTLED AWAKE FROM A DREAM AND IMMEDIATELY checked his left hand. There was no blood. In the dream he was playing Frisbee with a suited, masked man and suddenly the Frisbee turned into a knife-thin horseshoe just as he caught it.

“Have a good day,” he said aloud.

Malachy checked the clock: 6:00 A.M. He settled back into the warm bed and tried to resume sleeping. Some days going back to sleep came easily no matter what the dream. Some days he knew sleep had fled and was not returning. He kept rubbing his fingers. A horseshoe was supposed to bring good luck, but a flying horseshoe-knife was definitely not a soporific. He considered his quick decision to take on the Bari project. Somehow Singer needing more money and the nameless voice in the storeroom introducing himself with the story of Singer’s gambling debt seemed a good omen. He thought about Singer and his ironic nickname. Singer, who sounded like an off-key frog when he tried to sing, got his nickname from a strong resemblance to Dennis Day, the famous tenor on the Jack Benny show. Malachy remembered the day he got the call from Singer.

*Singer asked to see Malachy in his office. Malachy was surprised because he saw Singer at least two or three times a week in the Shamrock, Singer’s bar.*

*Singer and Malachy’s father had been longtime best friends, and he*