

## The Bloodhound

I asked Bishop for a parish, but he gave me a school.

“Excellency,” I said, “do you really see me turning undergrads away from suicide?”

He waved his hand. “Oh, it’s more than that. You’ll have to save their professors, too. Daily.”

I arrived at Lazarus College the weekend before classes resumed. Crowds of returning students and their parents were bringing up mini-fridges and pillows and duffel bags into the dorms, like a string of ants conveying food to the colony. The leaves were already rusting orange and yellow. It was a good shot for the admissions brochure, but in that foliage I saw an announcement of my own decline. The old bishop had kept me as his assistant for thirteen years; never during that tenure did I imagine his retirement would leave me a campus chaplain in the mountains, planning rosary-themed coffeehouse events and printing flyers about feast days and abstinence.

The students who greeted me felt as alien as they had when I was among them twenty years before, my pre-Lasik eyes squinting up at the clock tower, a scarf tight around my neck. My alma mater, rather than welcoming me as an old son, gave me an ominous sense of circuitry. Perhaps they would bury me here.

Two people came to the first mass I celebrated in the chapel. The first was Peg, the college receptionist, whom I later learned was devout enough to attend even when there was no priest; and the other was the president of Lazarus. He came halfway through the homily and left immediately after the Eucharist with an apologetic dip of his head, his face lit a spectral blue by his smartphone. Peg had bowed her head to pray. I was preaching to the stones.

The first morning of the fall semester, I discovered one thing the previous chaplain had failed to leave me—the password for the campus ministry email, prayers@lazarus.edu. The dean of students didn't know it. "Father must have left it somewhere," he texted me. "Maybe check for post-its??"

I devoted two hours in the chaplain's office—a garret over the library—to flipping through my predecessor's copies of the Catechism and the *Summa* for hidden notes. Choosing a Bible verse seemed a bit fundamentalist for him. Perhaps Ignatius, the patron saint of his church (Invalid...Check CAPS LOCK), or Elvis, the name of the dog he'd kept at the Passionist monastery (Invalid...Check CAPS LOCK).

Christ had given Peter the keys; I knew he could give me this code. As I tried to collect my wits, the phone rang. "Chaplain's office," I answered.

“Father there?” a man asked in a slurry voice.

“Yes, this is he.”

“The hell they done with Father?”

“The college? Nothing. He passed away a couple weeks ago.”

“You telling me a story?”

“No, sir. The funeral mass was at St. Martin’s.”

“Now listen here, I ain’t doing too good,” the man said. “I can’t work. I been coming in for some help about once a month.”

“Are you Catholic?” I asked. “Have you had the Anointing of the Sick?”

“I don’t need any ointment. Father’s been helping me out. You sure he ain’t there?”

“Is this a prank?” I asked. The connection clicked dead.

Feeling a delicious self-pity, I trudged down to the IT department in the basement. The helpdesk woman was a temp with bifocals whose glare hid her eyes and made her look somehow inhuman. “Can you reset the password for the ministry email?” I asked her.

“Only the account user can do that.”

“This one can’t. Unfortunately, you see, he’s dead.”

“Deh-ead?” She stretched the word into two bewildered syllables. “That’s sad. Who was he?”

“His name was Mudd.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“No, it was literally Mudd. Father Mudd,” I said. “I need access to that email. The alumni use it to request intentions for mass.”

She shrugged. “They laid off the lady who resets passwords. I mainly just fix the copiers.”

A tattoo of a strawberry on her neck seemed to pulsate.

“I guess it’s only right they put IT in the basement,” I told her. “It’s the department closest to hell.”

“You’re telling me,” she said. “Want me to call if I figure out something?”

“Well, you certainly can’t email me, can you?”

I stalked back to my tower, damp with defeat. I pictured all the answerless messages floating in the email like souls groaning for release from purgatory. “Fix the copiers,” I muttered. As I came up the library steps, a man limped into my path. His jowls were patchy with beard and he wore the dull, accusatory expression of a walrus under his bleached baseball cap. “Pardon me,” I said.

“You a priest, too?” he asked, not moving.

“I’m the only one on campus. Possibly the only one in this part of the Smokies.”

“Huh,” he said. “I went up and see Father Mudd, and he ain’t around.”

“Father Mudd’s no longer with us. I’m Father Travis, the new chaplain.” I shook his hand. Then the memory of his voice sank through me.

“Kenny Roy Dalton,” he said. “He really dead? Didn’t reckon I could trust the stranger on the phone.”

“That was me.” I beckoned toward the road. “If you’re hurting at the moment, though, there’s a St. Vincent de Paul in town.”

“Father leave something for me?”

“I doubt the man had much to leave anybody. What do you need?”

“Money.”

I said nothing. Bishop had warned me against giving out cash. The mines were shuttering; many of the local poor were enslaved to painkillers. I stepped around Kenny. “I won’t get my next check till the fifteenth. If you need help before then, you should try—”

“I need it now. Even fifty bucks. I can’t work.”

“*Even* fifty?” I said. “Do you think they gave me a Vatican ATM card? If you had any sense you wouldn’t be asking money from a priest who works at a dying school.”

I stiffened my heart against a shudder and went up the steps. I knew he wouldn’t follow me.