

## Room Thirteen

1912 words

It was after midnight and Father Liaden was tired. He had been struggling to get the words right for a sermon he was to deliver the following Sunday morning. It was an ambitious sermon whose theme was about the seduction of temptation and how everyone has the strength to overcome it. In the back of his mind, he knew he was being idealistic. His country parish was small, the people uneducated, and, as with most of Ireland, superstitious. Still, it was the privilege of youth to be idealistic., and he was inspired. Since he was a young boy, Father Liaden had dreamed of being a priest. He had finally gotten his chance.

That's when the phone rang. It was a nurse from the small hospital ten miles away in the town of Galway Bay.

“Sorry to bother you father. But it's Sean Fienny. I don't think he's going to last the night.”

In the five months he had been assigned to his parish, Father Liaden had never spoken to Sean Fienny though he knew who he was. Sean Fienny was in his seventies and had the curious

habit of lingering at the door just outside the church during mass. He never entered the church. The man reminded the young priest of a hungry child who peers in the window of a bakery knowing he doesn't have the money for the goods. Once, Father Liaden had attempted to approach him. But the old man had refused to speak to him and quickly walked away.

"The last time he woke," the nurse continued. "He asked for you."

"Me?" Father Liaden was surprised. There had been other times he had seen Sean Fienny watching him from a distance. On O'Malley Street where the shops were and one time standing outside the rectory staring up at the windows.

"Yes, you," the nurse confirmed. "He said he has something to tell you and I think he wants the Last Rites."

"All right.," Father Liaden agreed. "If he wakes again tell him I'm on my way."

The young priest was familiar with the small hospital in Galway Bay. He had been there several times to visit members of his flock as they recuperated or lay dying. It was part of the duties of a parish priest. But he had known the people or at least their families. Father Liaden did not know Sean Fienny or any of his family. As far as he knew Sean Fienny didn't have any family nor did anyone really know much about him. All the priest knew was that he kept to himself on a farm outside of town.

As he dressed, the priest felt annoyed. He could hear the rain coming down in sheets outside and the shutters on the rectory windows slamming against the building from the howling wind. He also wasn't satisfied with his sermon yet. He grew more annoyed as he ran through the rain under his umbrella from the rectory to the old Ford station wagon the parish supplied. A car that needed new tires and was often unreliable.

It was when he pulled out of the driveway and onto the road his annoyance gave way to something else. Fear. From seemingly out of nowhere, a car appeared behind him. It was true that for someone to be on the road at this late hour and on such a miserable night was unusual, but why this produced the anxiety he suddenly felt left him perplexed. He didn't often feel fear. Even in the most trying circumstances. As a young seminary student he had spent a year in Africa and one day led the other students in defending a small church without violence against a mob that wanted to sack it. People had commented on his courage and cool head.

As he drove, Father Liaden's anxiety increased. For two miles the car trailed him. He wondered if he was being followed, Something, maybe his intuition or instinct, or maybe even God, was telling him this wasn't right and to be careful. At the T intersection where Inverness Road runs into Sligo Road and you can only turn left or right, the priest turned left and the car behind him did so, too.

Through his rearview mirror and side view mirror, the priest watched the car following him. Over hill and over dale and through the narrow and winding country roads, the headlights followed. At one point, Father Liaden pulled over to the shoulder to let the car pass him. Instead, the car pulled over to the side as well and sat idling twenty feet away. The young priest stared into the headlights through the rearview mirror while the rain pounded down.

"Who are you?" he asked himself

After waiting for five minutes, the priest pulled away and the car behind him followed.

When the priest parked in front of the small two story brick building, he noticed the car that had been following him parked about fifty feet away. Father Liaden got out of his car holding his umbrella and carrying his briefcase containing the holy water, crucifix and communion needed for the final sacraments. He looked toward the car. He saw that the car was

long and black, the kind used for a funeral, and what appeared to be an attractive woman wearing a black dress and heavy veil exit from the back seat without an umbrella. It was obvious she had been driven by someone else and didn't care about the heavy rain.

Again, a deep sense of foreboding overtook him as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end telling him to stay away. He turned quickly and walked toward the hospital knowing that the woman was following him. His mind raced. Why was she following him? What did she want from him?

Inside, the nurse who had called sat waiting behind a receptionist desk.

"Father, thank you for coming. He asked for you again. I don't think there's much time."

"Which room?"

"Room Thirteen. Up the stairs and down the hall to your left."

Father Liaden hurried up the stairs. Something told him that the nurse was right, that this situation was urgent and that time was of the essence. He could still feel the woman behind him but he did not look back. He was too afraid. In fact, every fiber of his mind and body said run as he entered room thirteen.

Sean Fienny lay unconscious in his metal hospital bed. His face was unshaven and drawn as he struggled for breath. Father Liaden dropped his umbrella and placed his briefcase on the chair. Through his spiritual training, he knew that the normal order of the Last Rites is first confession, then the sacrament called the Anointing of the Sick, and ending with communion. He decided that because Sean Fienny was unconscious he would go straight to the Anointing of the Sick. This would give the man the best chance of having his sins forgiven. The priest pulled out his vile of holy water and turned to the dying man to begin the sacrament. But just as he opened his mouth to say "Our Father" the door flew open and there stood the woman.

The priest tried to look through the veil to see her face but there was nothing to see. The room suddenly felt cold, almost frigid, and it sent shivers through the young priest's body. He dropped the holy water which crashed into pieces on the hard tile floor. Then he grabbed the crucifix and held it out toward the woman. She giggled softly and turned to Sean Fienny.

“Do you take him or do you take me?” Her voice was clear and strong, almost melodic.

The young priest turned to the old man whose eyes opened wide in fear. The old man looked toward the priest as if pleading for help, like a child who was drowning. Then Sean Fienny's eyes fell upon the woman. The fear left his eyes and was replaced with resignation.

“I take you,” he whispered.

Father Liaden looked back toward the woman but she was gone. It was as if she had never been there. The priest's eyes returned to Sean Fienny and saw that the old man was gone too. His life force had disappeared with the woman.

The young priest fell to his knees and began to pray. But he knew it was useless for he now understood what the woman had wanted. She had wanted Sean Fienny's soul. He also knew that what had appeared to him wasn't a woman. It was something else and all the crucifixes, all the holy water and all the communion were powerless against it. Still, he prayed for he did not know what else to do, and he prayed until the sun rose over Galway Bay,

The next morning, Father Liaden slept in. Before he had gone to bed, he had written a note for the rectory caretaker instructing her to inform the congregation that he would not be giving mass this Sunday. Then he had slept and dozed trying to still his mind from the previous nights encounters. What he came away with was a deep sense of mystery. Who was Sean Fienny anyway and why did his soul have such importance to the unspeakable evil that had confronted him last night? It baffled and intrigued the priest like nothing he had ever known.

He finally summoned the strength to leave his bed at five in the afternoon. He made his way to the dining room where Mrs. O'Connor brought him a bowl of chicken soup. As he sat slurping his soup, there was a knock on the door. He heard Mrs. O'Connor answer it. She returned to the dining room.

"There's a Mr. John Ridgeway, Esquire, with a message from Sean Fienny."

"All right," Father Liaden said, wondering what was going to happen next.

The young priest went to the front door to find a diminutive and balding man standing before him. He had on a finely tailored grey wool suit.

"You're rich," the lawyer said.

"What!"

"You're rich," the lawyer repeated. "Sean Fienny has left his fortune to you."

"You mean the church?"

"No, you. Personally, Father James Liaden."

"What?" the Priest said again. He was dumbfounded.

"You're rich. Farm, house, machinery, bank accounts. It's a fortune, at least by country standards."

"I don't want the man's fortune."

"Oh come now," the lawyer smiled. "Think of the good you could do. I mean, you could distribute it to the poor."

"I don't want it."

The small lawyer smiled again. There was a twinkle in his eye.

"Mr. Fienny thought you would say this. So he added an incentive. He said there is a box over the mantle of the fireplace in the house with a letter that would explain everything."

Money didn't mean anything to the priest. But an answer to the mystery of who was Sean Fienev was worth something. For a moment, the priest almost bit. But then he thought of the sermon he had written for today. He realized the sermon about the seduction of temptation had been for himself.

"The devil with you," Father Liaden said. "I don't want it. Give the fortune to the state. I hope Sean Fienev rests in peace."

The priest closed the door, walked back to the dinning room, and finished his soup.