

# CHAPTER 1

## Altar Boy

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15

**1977–1978**

**Erie, Pennsylvania**

*“For all the ways I have harmed others I ask for forgiveness. For all the ways I have been harmed by others I offer forgiveness.”* David recited his daily prayer as he tugged open the heavy wooden doors of St. Florian Catholic Church.

His brothers had been altar boys before him, a tradition that paused for ten years until David came of age. Finally David was the one to represent the Wagner family at weekly Mass, extending the legacy that had made his family a more familiar fixture on the altar than most of the priests.

David enjoyed the privileges that came with his status, such as being the one to carry the crucifix in processions, ring the bells during the consecration of the Eucharist, or add incense to the thurible during funerals. His family sat in the third pew on

the right every Sunday, on holy days of obligation, and on Ash Wednesday, which was not technically a holy day.

David loved being an altar boy almost as much as he loved baseball, and his fervor reignited his mother's hope, the hope shared by so many Catholic mothers like her, that one of her sons would become a priest. Again today David was first to arrive. In the solitude of these cold, stone walls, he could most tangibly experience the presence of God. Like the Tabernacle of Moses, the edifice itself proclaimed God's absolute authority.

He looked around the empty sacristy. Even in this relatively insignificant anteroom, used to prepare for Mass, a high reverence for God was fully on display. Every detail evoked an august sensuality, from the imposing dark wood furnishings to the deep plush and scarlet hue of the carpeting.

Even the air was rarefied; laden with incense, chrism oil, and altar flowers from thousands of Masses. Lighting was scarce, which kept the space at a perpetual dusk that cast long shadows into the deepest corners of the room and amplified the silence.

A dark mahogany armoire held the priests' vestments. Carved, high-back wooden chairs with red velvet seats flanked a built-in cabinet with brass handles. Only priests were permitted to sit in those chairs, but David had sat in one on another early morning, and found it to be profoundly uncomfortable.

The cabinet itself stored the linens used in the celebration of the Mass. The top drawers held the altar cloths the priests used to wipe away their iniquities during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The bottom drawers contained the altar linens, hand-stitched by some of the parish women. These ladies dedicated countless hours to ensure that every detail of the altar was seasonally appropriate and aesthetically pleasing.

On top of the cabinet sat a gold chalice, crystal wine goblet, and two small glass pitchers used for Holy Communion.

David retrieved a red cassock from the rack of altar-boy vestments hung in order by size. Last year David had used the ones at the end closest to the back door. But now, his lanky frame led him to the far right of the rack, to the ones reserved for the tallest altar boys, even though he was only in sixth grade.

Getting first choice of cassocks was another reason David liked to arrive first. He checked his appearance in the mirror on the inside of the armoire door. His cassock stopped just above the hem of his uniform slacks, an important detail to avoid a revival of last year's running joke that altar boys flew commando. He pulled the white surplice over his head and wished for the hundredth time that it didn't have lace on the bottom. He smoothed the folds of his vestment; then eyed his penny loafers, coins inserted with Abe's face up, and hoped his mother would be seated on the aisle to see him.

David turned his attention to the preparation of the gifts. This type of extra effort got you called up for funerals and weddings, events that meant two coveted perks to an altar boy: getting out of class, and big tips, especially if you didn't wear sneakers. He counted out the hosts from a baggie and placed them one by one in the chalice. Then he unscrewed the cap of the wine bottle, releasing its syrupy bouquet.

David wondered who would say Mass today. If it was Father John, he knew to fill the wine pitcher to the brim and the water pitcher only halfway; Father liked to save a big swig for cleanup after Holy Communion, and he didn't like it too watered down. Once consecrated, all the wine had to be consumed; the hosts were stored in a chalice kept locked in the tabernacle. David always wondered why it had to be locked. After all, who would steal hosts that had been transubstantiated into the living body of Christ? He couldn't think of a worse sin.

Maybe Father Tom would say Mass this morning. He preferred rich food to strong drink, but he was stern and rigid about the particulars of the Mass, which forced David to focus more on getting the details right than on the celebration itself. With any luck it would be the new priest, whom David knew nothing about. All anyone had seen of him so far was his red Mustang, a source of curiosity among all the boys. David hoped to be first to meet him and maybe even first to get a ride in that car.

As David turned to put the wine back in the cabinet, he was startled by the presence of someone else in the sacristy. It was the new priest. David was surprised by how young he looked. Most of the priests were old, at least in their forties. The man was dressed traditionally in an alb, a white, ankle-length tunic with a green cincture tied at the waist. Underneath were the trademark black clerical slacks and shirt with a white neckband worn only by Roman Catholic priests.

The priest stood at the open armoire looking for a vestment. He chose a green chasuble—green, because it was ordinary time on the church calendar. He vanished briefly beneath the circular garment before his head popped out of the hole at its center. As he fixed his hair in the mirror, he caught David's eye in the reflection.

"David Wagner, Father," he said quickly, reaching out his hand to introduce himself. Father's loose, long brown hair made him look a little like a lost member of The Partridge Family. He was only about an inch taller than David, even in his Docksiders.

He just might be cool, David surmised, at least for a priest.

"James Jarzombek," he said, shaking David's hand. "You can call me Father Jimmy."

"Good to meet you, Father."

Just then, Joe burst into the sacristy with only five minutes until the start of Mass. Joe was one of David's best friends. He

had earned a reputation as the class brainiac, but only because he wasn't as funny as David, so people assumed he was smarter. David relished any opportunity to one-up his good friend, so it looked like today was off to a great start.

Joe grinned sheepishly at David as he hurried to get dressed. He introduced himself to Father, probably wondering if he was the type of guy who would make a big deal out of tardiness. When no reprimand came, Joe fell in line behind David, and the two boys led the way from the sacristy to the narthex at the back of the church with Father following. In his rush, Joe had failed to notice that his cassock was too short, ending at his knees, but David didn't.

The organ exhaled the opening chords of "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," signaling the start of Mass. As the faithful rose to their feet, David stepped to the front of the line and inhaled the fragrance of his faith, a rare fusion of incense that had baked into the walls; candle wax that had carried thousands of intentions heavenward for a dollar apiece; and the newer, cheaper scent of old-lady perfume.

His eyes surveyed the front of the church for his mother, as he recalled his sister's warning on his first day as an altar boy: "Remember, Davey, don't wave to people in church, because you aren't in the theater but the House of Our Lord."

He lifted the crucifix high on its pole and pushed his shoulders back. Father Jimmy, hands pressed solemnly at his chest, smiled benevolently to the congregation. David couldn't help grinning discreetly at his mother as he passed by.

Following Mass and a few minutes chatting up Father Jimmy, David and Joe strolled slowly back to school, delaying the inevitable return to class.

"Why'd you do it?" Joe asked, referring to the strike David had organized in science class the week before.

“Dissection, Joe. It’s all about dissection. Class 6-2 got to dissect first, and we had to leapfrog them.” David laughed at his own joke and at the recollection of fifteen sixth graders marching up and down the hallways behind him in mock protest.

The whole thing lasted only a few minutes before the principal, Sister Annalise, got wind of it and positioned herself cross-armed at the end of the hall, right in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary. In the lecture that followed, she attempted to expand the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” to include teachers and administrators, but David found the link dubious at best, and completely unconvincing as far as his future with practical jokes.

His best friend, Nicole, was the only reason the consequences were no more severe. Her doe eyes and big smile made her the picture of innocence. She had a healthy respect for her parents’ authority, and simply explained to Sister Annalise that the strike was actually a good thing because the students were expressing their interest in more hands-on learning. It seemed to assuage Sister’s anger. David realized again why Nicole had been his best friend since preschool; they were a perfect team.

“You must admit I negotiated a good settlement,” David said, glancing at Joe for acknowledgment. Joe had book smarts, but he lacked David’s appetite for risk—something David’s big brother, Matthew, had said was the mark of a true leader. David’s willingness to take risks for laughs had paid off handsomely so far in his school career.

Before last week’s strike, David’s sixth-grade year had been most notable for the infamous pencil drop. He hatched the plan to try to add some spark to an otherwise boring day. He quietly directed everyone in Sister Susan’s class to drop their pencils at precisely 1:38 p.m. At 1:37, kids began looking nervously at

David, who couldn't believe they were getting so worked up over a simple prank. He nodded that it was a go.

As the second hand swept toward the twelve, Ticonderoga #2s rained down from the desks to the linoleum, startling Sister and marring her otherwise perfect blackboard penmanship. She spun around in search of the culprit, so David quickly threw up the lid to his desk and ducked inside, pretending to search for a book. When he saw Sister's black shoes appear beside his desk out of the corner of his eye, he swallowed hard and lifted his head, his red cheeks giving him away. David returned her glare with a practiced, if unconvincing, look of innocence. Nicole's outburst of laughter had given David his reward, and Sister the evidence she needed to send him to the principal's office.

David hopped off the bus after school and ran up the street to a tiny Cape Cod on the lower East Side—the only home he'd ever known. A few years ago the house had been bursting with the ruckus of six children. Today David sat alone in the quiet bedroom his brothers once shared. Across the hall the girls shared the other upstairs bedroom, although only the younger two still lived at home. David had spent his earliest years in a crib tucked in the center hall closet.

David's mother, Virginia, was an eastern European Catholic, both traits deeply embedded in her DNA. His father and namesake was a diminutive German with an iron constitution. His job with the coal company required him to crisscross Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and eastern Ohio. He was always home for dinner, but his appearances at the table were quiet and brief. As soon as the family finished eating, he'd retreat to his La-Z-Boy to watch the evening news and fall asleep.

As a young man, the senior David had been a proud member of the Wagner Nine, a baseball team formed by his thirteen siblings. But as a father, he struggled to provide. Somehow he



and Virginia always managed to scrape together just enough to feed their growing family and faithfully fill their weekly collection envelopes at church. In fact, in a minor miracle, Virginia had won a \$325 lottery ticket, which provided the cash they had needed to close on their house.

The Wagner children grew up knowing that ham on Sunday meant potatoes and ham on Monday, split pea soup on Tuesday, and ham-and-cheese sandwiches on Wednesday. At the end of the month as money dwindled, they braced for the inevitable stench of kidneys boiling on the stovetop, assaulting their noses the moment they turned onto their street. It was one of the reasons David never invited friends home.

David's mother had been in her late forties when he was born. The girls liked to say, "Mother brought him home from the hospital and gave him to us as our living baby doll." But it was his brothers' attention he craved, especially Matthew's.

The day Matthew left for college had ranked as the saddest day of David's young life.; David was barely eight years old. The family gathered together to say the rosary as they did every Sunday. Then they ate sandwiches in the kitchen. When they finished, Matthew told David to come with him. He carried David on one arm and his suitcase on the other. He stood David on the couch in the family room so he could look him in the eye. David spotted a tiny dot of Miracle Whip in the corner of his brother's mouth and fixated on its movement up and down as he spoke, unable to hear that his hero and best friend was leaving.

Matthew and David were best friends despite their ten-year age difference. When Matthew wasn't working, he spent most of his free time with his little brother, playing at the arcades, working around the house, or watching TV. Matthew never tired of David or got annoyed with him. He talked to him like a big



kid, and he was always there for him when David got hurt or felt sad. David couldn't imagine a day without him, let alone four years.

"When will you be back?" David asked, trying to sound brave.

"Not 'til Thanksgiving, buddy. College is a lot of work, and it costs lots of money to go back and forth. But I promise when I get home we'll hang out, okay? We'll go to the arcade. Play Pong. Whatever you want. And I'll take you to get ice cream. How about that?"

"You're a little man now, David. You start school tomorrow. You'll make lots of friends your age. It'll be great. And you know what? I bet you'll be so busy with homework and friends you won't even realize I'm gone. The time will go fast, I promise."

David's gaze shifted from the Miracle Whip up to Matthew's eyes, which were filling with tears. Unable to hold back any longer, David threw his arms around his big brother and squeezed tight.

"Please don't leave me," David whispered through sobs. Matthew held him for a long time. Finally, he sat him down on the couch and wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. David had stifled his tears and let his brother go.

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Matthew came back eventually. It was when David was entering fifth grade. Following graduation Matthew returned home to await entry into the US Air Force. Happily for David, the process took almost a year. Whenever he returned from school and Matthew got off work, the two were once again inseparable.

David would never forget the day his brother took him along to help pick out a new car. Matthew was working at a

Dodge dealership at the time, so they walked the lot side-by-side, eventually narrowing their choices down to a Polaris and a Dart.

“What do you think, Buddy, which one should I get?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s right, David. You never buy a car without taking it for a test drive. Great instincts. Want to take one out for a spin?”

David’s eyes widened at the suggestion. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. Which one do you want to drive first?”

“This one,” David said, pointing to a silver Dodge Dart.

“Hop in,” Matthew said, opening the door for his little brother and then disappearing briefly inside the dealership to retrieve the keys and a temporary plate. He slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine, revving it for effect.

Even now David could recall the exhilaration of that day, riding down the highway with the sunroof open, just him and his big brother. Matthew let him stand up in the sunroof; he rode that way until the wind dried up his spit and tears. When they got back to the lot Matthew said, “So, David, what do you think? Which car should I buy?”

“The Dart, no doubt about it,” David said. Matthew agreed and they drove it home that day.

Matthew got his wings in 1976. It was the beginning of David’s sixth-grade year. David and his parents drove down to Texas to bring Matthew back to await deployment. He would soon head to Europe to fly fighter jets. David especially hated sitting through the interminable school days during that time. All he wanted was to get home and be with Matthew, who was leaving in less than thirty days and would be gone for four years. David would be in high school when his brother came home again.

And what if he didn’t come home? What if something happened to him? Terror coursed through his veins as he pushed the

bad thoughts from his mind. David didn't say a word about his fears to his brother or anyone else; one didn't talk about such things, his mother often reminded them.

On Matthew's last night home, the Wagner family gathered for a send-off dinner. Virginia made pot roast with mashed potatoes and canned green beans. Most of the conversation focused on speculation about Matthew's assignment. Matthew either didn't know or wasn't allowed to answer most of their questions. Philip shared news of his recent raise.

As his mother sliced white cake for dessert, Philip finally engaged his youngest brother in the conversation.

"Hey David, are you getting many funerals as an altar boy? I bet I did one every two weeks when I was your age. That was some good money. What are they paying you guys these days?"

"I do a lot of them," David said eagerly. "I get ten dollars most of the time, but I got twenty for the Marcella funeral. They own that jewelry store on Peach Street. The grandfather died. I was wearing my penny loafers. People love it when you wear nice shoes."

"Good work, Bud," Matthew said, chuckling as he stretched his arm behind David to create space in his abdomen after the big meal. "Is Father John still chugging the altar wine?"

"Matthew!" Virginia said. "Don't you talk like that about a priest. Once the wine has been consecrated, Father has to drink it all; it's the rule."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't have to drink the beer he made us carry into the rectory for him. I assure you Koehler's Beer ain't consecrated."

"Don't say another word. You will not desecrate the Catholic Church in this house. I won't stand for it. I don't care if you're in the Air Force or president of the United States." Virginia grabbed her plate and huffed into the kitchen.

As the door swung closed behind her, Philip said, “Way to go, Matthew. Why do you say things like that in front of her?” Then he lowered his voice to a whisper, just loud enough to be heard. “Idiot.”

“Shut up, Phil.” Matthew said, looking toward his father, but finding no relief. The elder Wagner sat stone-faced with his eyes downcast. Clearly this conversation was over. “Come on, David,” Matthew said, inviting his brother to retreat into the family room.

“Did he really make you do that, Matthew? Carry beer?”

“Absolutely.” Matthew chuckled. “Priests are people too, you know, despite what Mother thinks. Father John is an old drunk just like Grandpa was. That doesn’t make him an awful person. But in Mom’s eyes, priests are as holy as Jesus Christ, and their word is gospel. That ain’t ever gonna change.

“Learn from my mistakes, Davey. It’s better not to talk about some stuff.”