

Luigi and Stefan meet for the first time

Father Stefan Satillieu was a busy priest working between the 600-year-old St Malo church of St Martin, in the old walled town, and the drop-in centre that he ran in a tiny warehouse near the docks. This was a relatively new parish for the priest and was only his second job for the Catholic church after being ordained.

His congregation was an ageing group of mainly female residents in the old town, although the tourist season saw a lot of visitors to his church. At some services the holidaymakers outnumbered his own parishioners and he had taken to offering snippets of the service in other languages, mainly German and English. This encouraged more donations from tourists and site-seers, helping maintain the fabric of the old church building, and also helping fund food and clothes for the poor and homeless who attended his drop-in centre.

Late in the August holiday season, 2010, Stefan was watching a new tourist guide show a coach party of American tourists around St Martin's when he noticed a young local boy tagging along at the rear of the group. Stefan had seen him running through the streets before but the suspicious way that he was pushing himself into a group of tourists definitely suggested that he was up to no good. When he approached the group the young lad; baseball cap, a baggy hoody, shorts, and trainers; quickly ran out the way he had come in. Stefan chuckled and continued listening to the tour guide's semi-accurate history of his church.

No more than twenty minutes later the same young boy came rushing into the church, dodged past Stefan shouting 'Sorry, sorry, excuse me,' and ran into the side chapel. Only moments after he was out of site, one of the plain clothed store detectives ran into the church.

'Did you see a young lad come in here, Father?' asked the guard, panting from what Father Stefan guessed was a long chase on a very warm day.

'I think you should be looking elsewhere,' replied Stefan shrugging nonchalantly. This wasn't a lie exactly, just a misdirection, and the plain-clothed guard thanked him, turned, and rushed out of the church.

Stefan found the boy hiding behind the gilt-inlaid font in the side chapel, where Stefan held the very small number of baptisms that he performed each year.

'You can come out now. The security guard has gone.'

Luigi Legrand dropped something behind him and stepped out of the shadows with a huge grin on his face. He had dark curly hair and a slightly crooked smile that made him look older than his undoubtedly young years.

'And why don't you pick up what you've dropped back there. Come on, show me what you've got. I won't tell anyone, not if you are honest with me.'

'Ok, well, I will show you, but you'll never catch me if you start to get funny about it,' said Luigi picking up the two wallets that he had dropped on the floor. 'If you try and grab me, I'll scream the place down. Priests don't have the best reputation these days, Father.'

'What?' blurted out Stefan, smiling at Luigi's bare faced cheek.

'I don't mean any harm, but I can't afford to get caught.'

'You're a confident lad, aren't you...er...let's start with you telling me your name, and then we can see what we can do with those wallets you have there.'

'I'm Luigi...Luigi Legrand. What's your name then?'

‘You can call me Father Stefan. Now hand those wallets to me and I’ll try and get them back to their rightful owners.’

Luigi tapped the wallets on the palm of his hand, frowned for a moment, then skidded them across the stone floor to Stefan’s feet and the priest bent down and picked them up. This didn’t worry Luigi unduly. All the cash from the wallets, some 200 euros and nearly 300 dollars, was safely tucked in his back pocket. The wallets were only worth whatever he could get from the local gangs for the credit cards, but they had a short lifespan and would be cancelled before the day was done.

‘I can guess what happened,’ Father Stefan said to Luigi, ‘But why don’t you fill me in.’

‘How do you mean?’ said Luigi innocently, glancing over Stefan’s shoulder at his exit.

‘The security guard was chasing you, there are two wallets here that aren’t yours, and you were following that crowd of American tourists earlier this afternoon, and...’ Father Stefan paused for dramatic effect leafing through the wallets, ‘You are neither Wayne Petroski, nor indeed Stanley Sorenson, both from the USA it would appear.’

Luigi looked at the priest, looked past him again to see what room there was for him to escape if he needed to, glanced out at the back of the church to make sure it was clear, then shrugged.

‘Ok, so I took a couple of wallets from the tourists. I was going through them in the changing rooms of that fancy clothes store, the expensive one near the beach carpark, and this security guard suddenly pulled the curtains open and I had to dodge past him and ended up in here.’

‘And why did you come into my Church, young Luigi?’

‘I didn’t think that they would follow me in here, but it’s dark in the corners and it’s a good place to hide.’

‘You say that like you’ve hidden in here before, Luigi.’

‘Once or twice...maybe,’ said Luigi with a big smirk.

‘Where do you live, Luigi?’ asked Stefan, wondering if the boy was on the street or had a home. His clothes looked clean and new, and he certainly didn’t look like someone who was sleeping rough.

‘Up in the central apartments, with my mum and dad.’

‘What would they make of all this, do you think?’

‘I’m not telling my parents, and you can’t either...please. Mum’s not so well right now and I don’t want her to know...’

Luigi trailed off and looked down at the ground. Stefan thought he looked pitiful, like someone had suddenly let all the air out of a balloon, with barely a trace of the cheeky confident boy that he had been only moments earlier. He made up his mind.

‘Are you hungry, Luigi?’

‘Why?’

‘Well, if you are, I have some stew, bread, cheese, salad and probably some fruit as well, back in the sacristy. You can come and get something to eat, then leave out that way. It’s probably safer than going out the front just in case they are watching, out in the square.’

Luigi examined the priest for a long moment, his big eyebrows, dark eyes, and kind face, then decided he was probably someone he could trust. He was normally a good judge of character.

‘So, when you say bread, it’s not that skinny wafer stuff that you Priests eat is it?’

‘Well, Luigi Legrand, I very much doubt that you would be a suitable recipient of that sort of bread but, no, it’s from the Boulangerie on the waterfront.’

‘I could eat,’ replied Luigi, his big grin returning.