

Chapter X

Coming home now to an empty house was not something Grimaldi looked forward to. Once, when Katie was alive, getting in late was something that he didn't mind. It gave him time to putter in the kitchen, to shift gears.

Sometimes she was waiting for him, in the glow of the reading light, novel in hand. He'd slip into bed beside her, they'd talk briefly, and sometimes they'd make love.

Those nights there was something special in the air, an understanding and acceptance. Once or twice since she'd died, he'd felt that special presence. He would have sworn there were times when her hand rested on his shoulder reassuring him and calming his fears.

This night, he showered and shaved. It was more habit than anything. Hunger had been left far behind, but he poured himself a glass of cold water and slipped into his favorite chair in the living room, where he sipped the water and flipped channels with the remote control.

He turned to CNN for the news.

The president had given Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis an ultimatum: leave Kuwait by the fifteenth or face certain war. There was some speculation as to whether Iraq would budge. The consensus was that they would wait to the last minute before negotiating.

Waiting was always difficult for him. Maybe that's why when he prayed he choose to center. Maybe he'd learned a new way to pray on patrol in the Mei Cong River

Delta. He imagined the waiting would be the same in a bunker along the Kuwaiti/Iraqi border.

Waiting shits, he thought.

He watched a report on Lithuanians and wondered what the hell Gorbachev was up to. Why send tanks into Vilnius?

He flipped off the television and sipped more of the water.

What did anything matter? Schools, murders, wars? And what did anything he want matter? At different times he'd felt contentment in life. But contentment was not the end all and be all of life. Maybe suffering was more important. Maybe what he'd learned since Katie's death was what counted and why he was having trouble dealing with the death of a homeless man and a high school boy.

Could suffering and God be reconciled?

He looked out the window into a dark night.

If anything God wants us to be happy. If the only way for us to be happy is to be the unique creature God knows us to be, then everything that happens has a reason. It's supposed to bring us closer to God, thus to ourselves, thus to the reality of the people around us.

Change one detail and everything changes. Katie might still be alive. Rather than living happily ever after together, he might be dead.

Prygocki's number was listed in the phone book between E. and Peter J. He dialed the number.

``Hello," a sleepy voice said.

``Paul, this is Jack Grimaldi. I'm sorry to bother you. But I had a hunch."

``It's late Jack. You're right around the corner. Why don't you let me get to sleep and I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

``You teach that ritualistic sacrifice stuff. Do you really believe that the guy they found in the factory was part of one?"

``Jack, for Chris sake, it's late."

``Do you?"

``Of course I do. Your friend, Paradis the parasite, grilled me on that and I told him I'd bet my career on it."

``How much of this stuff is around?"

``Enough. Why do you think the conference took the time to write a paper on it? Every day kids are exposed to these nuts. They are never heard of again."

``I need specifics, Paul."

``Jack, these people do what they do — including killing — for the exact opposite reason that other people propagate and protect the unborn. Taking life is power. Power corrupts. Individuals become pawns."

``You're confusing me."

``It's 1 o'clock in the morning."

Grimaldi waited.

``As Christians, we believe that when Christ said you lose your life to gain it, he meant this in a figurative sense. These people will take this literally, make someone believe this, and lead this person to a sacrifice letting him or her believe they are helping create something special. They kill to prove that Christ doesn't care about people, to show that they are not worthy."

“We need a few medievalists around here,” Grimaldi said.

He remembered his own uncle, a priest, who was always battling unseen powers of evil. The old man struggled through wild-eyed depression, shouted and ranted. For months he wrote letters to the local papers incriminating columnists, calling them Modernists, forecasting the end of the world, throwing his lot in with Joe McCarthy, and rebelling against the post-Vatican II church.

In the end, Uncle Frank developed a sense of humor about things. But the dark, dog days returned occasionally. That's when he drank heavily.

“Jack,” Prygocki said, “give me a call anytime. I'd be happy to help. Just do me one favor. Don't call at 1 in the morning.”

Grimaldi thought he heard a voice through the phone connection. Maybe Melanie had returned.

The phone clicked in his ear.

Grimaldi woke at 2:34 and stumbled up the stairs to bed.

He was awakened abruptly shortly after that.

“Just do what I say and everything will work out okay,” a smooth, controlled voice said.

A white light flashed in his eyes and he was in the grip of something stronger. He felt the sheet being pulled tightly around him so that his arms were pinned to his body.

He was pulled to the floor and told to stand.

“You cooperate and everything will work out fine,” the voice said again.

Grimaldi kept his eyes closed.

“You really do have a choice,” the voice said.

He was directed to a chair and tied down in it. The light burned in his face.

“People don't just die,” the voice said, “especially when they're only 14 years old. Somebody kills them. Maybe it's an accident, but someone is behind it. We think you know who did it.

“If this were Nicaragua or El Salvador, we could understand. But this is the United States of America. Things like this don't happen in Deer River Crossing. So tell me about the boy.”

“I found his body on the sidewalk. Before that I never met him.”

“All the killing,” the voice said. “You think television has anything to do with this?”

Grimaldi remained silent.

“I asked you a question.”

“I found him dead on the sidewalk.”

“Was he carrying anything?”

“Not that I know of.”

The voice. Had he heard it before? Had he heard it before?

If anything good was going to come out of this, he would have to remain calm.

And, God knew, he was no martyr.

Now he could feel the adrenaline flowing through him. It was loud in his ears, louder than the ticking of the wall clock. The voices were conferring.

“God,” he whispered.

“What?” someone said.

He was gaining some distance.

“You,” a voice said, and someone poked him.

“Take it easy,” someone chastised.

“I was a bystander,” Grimaldi said. “Christ, I ran to help. I was getting in my car, and I heard the shot. I ran. I wanted to help.”

He felt humiliated.

“How did you know it was a shot?”

“When you've been in a war, you remember.”

“We're in a war,” the voice said. “The poor are in a war. Chris was a casualty. People are fighting for their dignity, their God-given right to exist and fulfill their destiny.”

“Sometimes it takes war to set this straight.”

“I've never known a war to set things straight,” Grimaldi said.

“Sometimes there's a war going on and people don't know it because it's called something else: discrimination, a low poverty rate, falling through the cracks. It just takes some noise to get people to listen.”

“All I know is that war is war and what you're talking about is something different,” Grimaldi said.

“You cut a deal and sign it in ink when you have power. It all looks so clean. Look at it this way, every deal is signed in a poor person's blood.”

Grimaldi felt the light on his face.

The voice lost interest in him.

Grimaldi tried to gain some distance, but he could only concentrate on the little things around him, voices, feet shuffling across the room, the swoosh of clothing rubbing against clothing.

He was praying again, losing track of the things around him, mouthing ``God."

``What?" a voice said.

``Leave him alone," another voice said.

What seemed like a long time passed before the voice came back.

``Grimaldi," it said.

Grimaldi nodded.

``Grimaldi, you find something out, you let us know."

``How am I supposed to do that?"

``We'll be watching you. All you have to do is to drop something, and someone will pick it up."

The figure busting out of his car, leapt into Grimaldi's mind.

``This situation has possibilities," he said. ``Will you be doing the laundry before you leave."

The slap on his face stung at first. Then it angered him.

``Reach out and touch someone," a new voice said.

``Nice to see you all have such a refined sense of humor."

He waited for the voice to speak.

The lights went out and he was alone.