

Chapter XVIII

Grimaldi spent most of the next morning trying to pin down the superintendent of schools. He talked to the School Office receptionist several times before lining up an afternoon appointment.

The whole time he thought about Lemay, but figured he could still get to the pastor at dinner.

It gave him some solace to know that there would be someone at the rectory when he got home. Besides he liked the old man even though most of what he knew of him made him keep his distance.

The drive out to the diocesan offices, located in a renovated seminary which accommodated about 30 offices, as well as lodging for the few remaining seminarians, was something else Grimaldi looked forward to.

The turrets of the gothic structure shot up into a sky unencumbered by other buildings. It sat on a hill with a winding drive that cut through a green swath of lawn used in days past for playing fields.

Back then vocations to the priesthood were up and the seminary had a good reputation.

Grimaldi had spied deer along the wooded area bordering the property on his last two trips. Today as he pulled into the parking area, he strained he scanned the boundary for some sign of wild life. No sign of any deer.

The door to the seminary had a huge handle, twice as large as that of a normal door. The door itself was twice as thick and twice as tall as any normal door. As he

opened the door, he wondered what it must have been like to call this place home, what the people like the old pastor would have experienced, and how his life had been so good at one point.

For a moment, Grimaldi paused and he swore he could hear the yells and screams from the behind him as young men competed against each other on the playing fields.

Sports, books, classes, and plenty of time for each. There must have been odd rituals and gestures that developed over time that bonded the young men in mysterious ways – their stories would be different from any he could imagine.

So how could Father Fallon come out of this incubator and wind up in a broken down rectory? he asked himself.

So now you had old men huddling against the dark in dilapidated buildings, alone; and schools that were drawing the blood out of elderly parishioners.

And if there were any monuments being built, like the cathedrals or seminaries, they were being renovated for office space.

The School Office receptionist sat behind a highly stylized glass screen – an extravagance because this is where the money was, he guessed. Things like that always surprised him because most of the other offices had been done over modestly, a coat of paint, drop ceilings, modular furniture. The School Office, however, got half of the second floor, plush carpeting, refinished the original ceilings and all the original woodwork.

The decor might have come right out of Modern Office.

Grimaldi walked through the glass thing and the first object that caught his eye was a huge wall plaque with the slogan ``Catholic Schools – Parents' Choice" in bold, handcrafted letters. A fever chart showed donations of over \$20,000,000.

The receptionist greeted him and picked up the phone.

Father McNamara, a white-faced priest of about 45, appeared in the door way of an adjoining office.

``Mr. Grimaldi," he said, ``what a pleasure to see you again. Sorry about the game of phone tag this morning. It's nice you could come out to the office."

He turned to the receptionist.

``Louise, we will be in the conference room. Please hold all calls."

``Mr. Grimaldi, so nice to have you. Nice day. You'll have to come out here for lunch some time. The lunches are spectacular, home-cooked by our own chef. You must do that, you really must."

``One day," Grimaldi said.

``Yes, one day," McNamara said, and gestured for him to follow.

The conference room had a table the president of Aetna Insurance would have been proud of, a sound oak table that filled the room. McNamara sat at the head. Grimaldi slid in next to him on the right side so he could look out the bay windows onto the wooded area outside the building. May be he would spot a deer.

``I understand you have some questions about the school closing. I can't say much, but I can tell you the bishop has my recommendation and will be making his decision soon."

``Do you recommend closing?"

“You'll have to wait for the bishop to make his decision. What I have to say doesn't make any difference, in this case. I just provide the information.”

Grimaldi looked away. The last time he was out to the office, he was offered a drink.

“Is something wrong?” the priest asked.

“I was wondering if you had anything to drink here, a cup of coffee or tea, a soft drink.”

“The hot water and things are just outside the door,” McNamara said.

“Would you mind if I got something?” Grimaldi asked.

“Not at all.”

He offered to get the priest something.

McNamara raised his hand.

“No thanks, I'm fine.”

The priest looked at his watch.

“You know,” he began to say something as Grimaldi returned, but Grimaldi broke in.

“Rumor has it that a threat was made on your life at St. Boniface's,” he said.

“You wouldn't believe it if I told you,” McNamara said.

“Try me.”

“This little old guy, let's call him Guido, walks up to me and says, ‘I know your car, I know where you live.’ ”

The priest was grinning madly.

“I hadn't had that much fun since Peoria, when we reorganized the entire school system.”

What a guy, Grimaldi thought.

“It's obvious you love your work,” Grimaldi said. “So it's true that the diocese has taken out a contract with a local security firm to protect the school against vandalism.”

“They want to bomb the place if they can't have it,” McNamara said. “They want to kill me and they want to bomb the building. Does it make any sense?”

“I could see why they would want to kill you,” Grimaldi said dryly.

The priest smiled. He leaned forward and pressed the tips of his fingers together and raised them to his lips.

“Grimaldi,” he said.

“Please, call me Jack,” Grimaldi said. “It seems like everybody around here is on a first name basis.”

“Call me Ed,” the priest said and continued.

“Jack, I trust nothing of this conversation will leave this room.”

“Goes without saying,” Grimaldi said.

“Good. We've got a very strict policy about confidentiality. Loose lips sink ships, and they also cost people their jobs.”

“Understood,” Grimaldi said. “But I, too, have a job to do. And it just so happens the image of the church in this diocese is going down the tubes. I have a proposal. I would like our offices to coordinate things so that we both can anticipate and diffuse negative reaction.”

The priest pressed his fingers to his lips.

“I really do think we can handle our own situation,” he told Grimaldi.

Grimaldi smiled.

“Just what is your job?” he asked.

“Right now it is to sit tight on a regionalization plan. It's sitting right on my desk.

The last thing I want is for some public relations person to have to present it to the public.”

“From what I understand, you might be better off if you did.”

“The bishop has been apprised of the situation and approves. It's up to me to make the next step.”

Grimaldi excused himself.

“The next step for me is the men's room. Would you be so kind as to point me in the right direction?”

“I'll be back shortly,” he said.

Grimaldi located the receptionist. He told her Father McNamara asked him to ask her to make a copy of the regionalization plan and leave it at the front desk. The plan was on the priest's desk. He reminded her to leave the plan back on McNamara's desk.

He found the bathroom.

Back inside the conference room, Grimaldi complimented Father McNamara on the office setting, and they chatted about the role of Catholic schools, including some legislation that would cut state funding to them.

“If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know,” McNamara said and shook Grimaldi's hand.

“I would love to hear more about the intricacies of interdiocesan politics sometime,” he said.

Then, Grimaldi found himself standing outside the building with the regionalization plan in his hands.

“A real charmer, that guy,” Grimaldi said out loud as he slipped behind the wheels of his Reliant and started down the long drive to the main road.

He ambled along through the last slow curve, where a fleeting image caught his eye – a deer leaping a fence bordering the territory around the seminary grounds and disappearing once again into the brush.

Grimaldi's heart leaped, too. Shortly afterwards, he was struck by the existence of the fence. He hadn't been aware that it even existed.

Those were the toughest barriers, the ones you can't see, he thought. How many barriers were out there waiting?

The bishop was already taking a beating over the school issue and that wasn't even scandalous – just business as usual, if any church business could be called “business.”

If it were true that Chris's murder was a case of mistaken identity, then what was really was going on? It was obviously tied to some clandestine goings on at the rectory.

And what about Lemay? Why weren't this guy's papers on file with the archivist? May be the rumor he heard about priests being written off entirely after leaving was true. It was like becoming a nonperson. Communists did stuff like that.

He looked forward to sitting down with Father Mallon, but he remembered it was the old man's day off. From what he had said, Father Mallon spent his days off watching after his sister at their place along the shore.

Grimaldi was going to have to fend for himself. They'd agreed that on the priest's day off, Grimaldi would eat out. It would save on having to pay an extra night for the cook.

He was sorry he had made that deal. He'd only been there for two meals, but he already looked forward to being with the pastor. Most nights he had worked late, he got home and threw something together and crashed in front of the television. It was a routine far from civilized, which was the way things were when Katie was around.

If he got home first, he would start dinner. If she got in, she would. Cooking for himself had become a chore. Breaking bread with someone else was the important thing, cooking for someone else is what he liked. Now that she was gone, it was quick snack. Sometimes he settled for fast food.

The deli, the one place he was familiar with, was out of the question. He decided that if he was going to eat out it would have to be some place different, maybe a little special. He would settle for a place with table cloths.

He pulled into the mini-plaza up the street from the chancery, to a Chinese restaurant called the Paragon. Some people at work had mentioned it. They said it was pretty good, meaning you could have your meal cooked without MSG, he guessed.

He tried to remember if he'd heard anything else about it and remembered the Chronicle had given it a pretty good review.

There was a pay phone on the wall outside the entrance so he called Paradis and asked him to join him. Inside, Grimaldi ordered a diet soda and waited.

Paradis told him to give him twenty minutes. He looked forward to seeing the reporter. Slowly, it was dawning on him that he dreaded eating alone. He looked around. There were plenty of people in the brightly lit room, whose walls were lined with booths and floor dotted with tables. All the tables were covered with linen cloths.

His seat out by the front window had a wide open view of the cathedral, its granite spire reaching upwards into a steely sky.

It was an odd building, put up after the old brownstone had been razed by a fire with suspicious origins in the late 1950s.

The diocese had gone all out to replace it. They brought in an artist from Italy to design a fancy mural, and stunning stained glass windows. In fact, he liked the different things that had been done in the building, but he had never really warmed to the structure as a whole.

He guessed the diocese was making some sort of statement, but the architecture was already dated and the interior badly in need of updating. Built a few years before Vatican II, the cathedral was missing most of characteristics that Vatican II called for.

The building was much too dignified, rather unwelcome, and aloof, set apart, distanced, divorced from the openness encouraged by the Council.

“Mr. Jack Grimaldi,” a voice said.

Grimaldi, thoughts broken, turned to a young woman standing by his table.

“Agnes Wilson, Chris' aunt,” the woman said and extended her right hand.

“I saw you from across the room, and I thought I might come over to say hello. I'm with my grandmother.”

She pointed to a booth against the far wall where Grimaldi saw an elderly woman bent over a menu. She didn't look up.

“I thought for a moment you might have your friend with you,” Grimaldi said.

“Who might that be?” she asked.

“Johnson or was it Nelson?”

“He's not my friend,” Watson said.

“Why don't you have a seat,” Grimaldi asked and motioned for her to sit down.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“I will sit, but only for a moment. I really have to get back to Grandmother.”

As he watched her speak, Grimaldi found himself attracted to her. He caught himself wondering what it would be like to kiss her. O God, he thought. Forgive me, Katie. He smiled meekly.

“This,” she said, catching his smile and looking down at the wedding band on her finger, “this is protection. Men are only trouble. I was hoping Chris would be different. I thought he was. But in the end, I guess, he was trouble, too.”

Grimaldi watched as her eyes welled up and listened as her voice began to crack. Long ago, he learned that this show of emotion was no sign of weakness in a woman. He waited.

“Now I've got too many things to think about. I've got plenty of friends, but there are no men in my life.”

A tissue appeared and she dabbed the moisture from her eyes.

“The day Johnson came by, I guess, I was a little vulnerable. You see, Mr. Grimaldi, and I don't know why I'm telling you this, I'm not really Chris' aunt. Chris was Johnson and mine's baby. He never knew. If there was one thing I will always regret, it's not having taken the time to tell him that. Hell, I can tell you. But I always thought there would be time. But there wasn't, just too many other things, and now they are what keeps me going.”

She dabbed her eyes again.

“The boy lived with my sister's family. I really thought he'd made it. He was an unusual boy. Maybe that's what did him in. But he wanted to be like the others, don't we all. He wasn't always like that. It happened after another friend of his left. Father Lemay had given him something to aim for, and then he went and left a big hole in Chris' life.

“He needed someone. He needed a father. Johnson did as much as he could, you know.

“Sometimes, I feel if only I'd a been there. Things might have been different. But they really won't have. Things happen. It's how we cope.

“That's one thing about Johnson. He's never been able to move on. He gets crazy ideas in his head, and gets stuck. Part of me says he needed me there to comfort him as much as I needed him there to comfort me the other day, to commiserate, to find in each other some comfort. But in my gut, I know he is beyond that. May be I was only an excuse.

“You know when I got pregnant, he wanted us to get married. That's the kind of guy he was and is. He has this peaceful nature, but he's always searching. And I always

felt like a decoration. I didn't want to be a decoration. I wanted justice and fairness. I believed in it because it was in my blood."

She laughed.

"He thought getting married would make a difference."

She was more composed now.

"Even now with the death of his son, he accepts and goes on. That's the way things are sometimes, and he goes about changing society, liberating people from oppression, telling me Chris' death should be a clarion call. How do you deal with that? Tell me."

She looked at him, into him for some resolve.

All Grimaldi could do was shrug.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Grimaldi," she said, after a long time, "I didn't want to burden you. My grandmother is waiting. I can tell you're a good man."

"Perhaps, we can have a drink some time," he said.

She smiled.

"Perhaps."

As she turned to leave, Paradis walked up to the table.

"No reason to hurry off because of me," he said.

"Paradis, Agnes Watson," Grimaldi said by way of introduction.

"Paradis works for the Chronicle," he added. "Agnes is Chris Brown's aunt."

He turned to Paradis to explain how he met Ms. Watson and a friend of hers just the other day at the cathedral.

``Sorry to hear about Chris," Paradis said. ``I hear he was an outstanding young man."

``She was just about to join her grandmother for dinner," Grimaldi said and pointed the table across the room.

``Nice to meet you," Watson said.

She turned to leave, but Grimaldi called her back.

``Ms. Watson," she said, ``you mentioned a Father Lemay. What happened to him?"

``He left the priesthood. Picked up one day and nobody has heard from him since. Broke Chris' heart. The boy thought he had a vocation."

Grimaldi thanked her again.

``About that drink," he said, ``I'd like that."

Paradis watched the woman walk across the room before he sat down.

``Nice tush," he said.

Grimaldi nodded.

``A sad woman," he said.

``Okay, buddy," Grimaldi said, after they ordered, ``what's up?"

``You ask me what's up. You're the mystery man, discovering dead bodies, getting run out of your house, talking to strange woman."

``The factory thing," Grimaldi said. ``Is the story alive?"

``No more news. There really isn't interest in digging up the John Doe, at least not by my editor."

“What if it just so happens our John Doe turns out to be the good Father Richard Lemay?”

“Go figure.”

“Give me a minute,” Grimaldi said. “We just sat down for dinner.”

“No shit, Jack, you get weirder everyday.”

“Comes with the territory.”

“What territory.”

“Living and loving.”

“Tell you what, you figure out a connection, any connection between that body and Lemay, and I'll go ahead with the story, editor's okay or not.”

“When I do, you'll be the first one to know.”

Paradis ate quickly, finished before Grimaldi, ordered a coffee, and left.

“You'll be the first to know,” Grimaldi said, and he was alone. He felt alone. He glanced across the room for Agnes Watson and her grandmother. He hadn't noticed them leave, and the thought crossed his mind, did she turn to wave goodbye? That, he thought, would be an extraordinary gesture for a woman who had put her son up for adoption by her sister and was getting ready to bury him.

She was certainly attractive, with her shoulder length hair and oval face. He pictured her and Johnson when they were younger, and except for the feeling that it was pretty, the picture never quite to form. It was fractured, and where it wasn't fractured, it was blurred.

When he caught himself reaching to touch her cheek, the spell was broken. He caught himself, and once again Katie came to mind. What do you think of this? he asked

her, and sipped his coffee, taking a moment before the last sip to swirl it around in the bottom of the cup.

At that moment, he looked and had the sensation that he had gone through this before. These were the times that reminded him of the expansiveness of time, the mystery of life, the goodness of God.

He'd experienced the same type of feeling during prayer, at Mass, on walks through the woods. When that happened he was privy to eternity. He had learned to stop and listen, to open himself up to whatever it was that was happening.

He had told Katie about these instances. "I think it's grace," he had told her. In her pointed manner, she'd ask, "If it's grace, how does it bring you closer to God?"

He never had an answer. But now he felt that if these moments had anything to say to him it was that life was mystery, he couldn't know everything, he could be less certain that there was even anything worth knowing, and that God did know.

Simply knowing that God knew, that God loved, things would work out. There was a purpose that was much bigger than he was, beyond him, but open to him. He had something important to do, he had a role, and he could make a difference. He could become someone he was meant to be from the beginning of time, someone that would exist for all eternity with God.

That belief alone resulted in a real death to the world.

As for Agnes, finding out about her would be much easier. All he had to do was find Johnson and have a talk. Why in the world would this woman confide in him? When he was reporting, people had opened up to him fairly often. He always felt like a stranger,

but he had the capacity to transform himself into a person who was approachable: now, the transformation was happening all around him.

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