

Chapter XIX

Within a few miles of the chancery, Grimaldi passed from the business district to burned out buildings, painted walls, and brown paper bags holding cheap booze.

Our Lady of Sorrows Church sat squarely in the middle of a bustling but dilapidated section of town. Grimaldi parked behind the church and rectory below a sign that blared, "Violators Will Be Towed," and walked to the back of the church.

This was Grimaldi's second trip to the church. He'd driven by it on several occasions with giving the building a second thought.

Paradis, however, have been serving meals there once a month with a Pax Christi group from his parish. They'd been at it six years.

Inside the stairwell, Grimaldi picked up voices intermingled with the banging of hammers.

Grimaldi recognized Brother Ben Bove from Paradis' description. Bove was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, with a carpenter's apron wrapped around his waist and a ball-pin hammer in his left hand.

He was talking rapidly in Spanish and gesturing wildly with the hammer.

"You win," Grimaldi said, as he approached.

When Bove turned to him, Grimaldi extended his right hand and introduced himself.

"How are you with a hammer?" Bove asked.

"Not as good as you are," Grimaldi answered.

"So you'd like to talk," Bove said.

``Time's always short."``

``Here it is."``

Ben dismissed another worker and closed the door to the kitchen.

``I know Chris Brown was a good enough sort," the little man said. He helped out around here occasionally, cooking and serving meals. Once in awhile I would call and him and a few of the students from the school would hose this place down."``

``What about Nelson Johnson?" Grimaldi asked.

``Johnson is a good man, but he has his favorites. It only made sense that Chris, being who he was, would be among the favored."``

``What do you mean, `being who he was'?"``

``Someone that might have a vocation," Bove said. ``Johnson is a kind of prophet around here. He gets his hands dirty, you know. A couple of times he's been in to see the bishop. Some people say they have a very unusual and close relationship, since the bishop is so aloof and Johnson is down to earth, etc."``

The religious brother opened the door and gestured for Grimaldi to follow.

The two men waked around the basement. Grimaldi took in the cracked linoleum floor, the badly peeling and crack walls. He tried to image what the place was like filled up with homeless men, aching for a hot meal and a place to sleep.

Except for wear and tear, the basement was just like the ones he'd seen in almost every church he'd ever been in. The basement was the place for junior high school dances, receptions after First Holy Communion and Confirmation, pot luck suppers, and hospitality Sundays.

“Things start to peak this time of year,” Bove said. “We get anywhere from 80-120 men a night. We can only sleep 80, says the fire marshal. So we try to do good by most of the men, and sometimes we take more, but the overflow we send down the street to another shelter.”

He pointed out the improvement projects. Where the stage had been, there was now a storage area for mattresses and pillows. The wood had been supplied by a grant from the city. Special doors had been put in; again the money came from the city.

At the entrance to the bathroom area, Bove stopped.

“Chris was an outstanding young man. I can only tell you so much about him. But talk to Jose. He’ll be able to give you a better idea of what kind of kid Chris was.”

A teenager with a baby face emerged from one of the green wooden stalls with a brush and a bucket.

“This is Mr. Grimaldi,” Bove said. “I told him you would be happy to answer his questions about Chris, your dead buddy.”

The teenager glared at the short man.

No lack of respect here, Grimaldi thought.

Jose walked past the two men down the hallway. He stopped below a red exit sign, put the bucket down, and dropped the brush into it with a splash.

“That little man is part buzzard,” Jose whispered.

He looked up at Grimaldi, as if this were the first time he’d even noticed him.

“You want something?” he hissed.

“I found Chris that night and my life has not been the same since. I'm here hoping what you have to say will help make some sense of what has happened. I didn't know Chris, but I understand he was quite a guy.”

Jose sat down on the step leading up to a door marked in big red letter, Exit.

His head sank, and he spoke softly.

“These men come here because they don't have anywhere to go. With Chris, it was like that. I always had a place to go. He didn't. I guess he has a place now.”

Grimaldi shifted his weight, uneasily, from one foot to the other, waiting.

“You a cop?” Jose asked.

Grimaldi shook his head, no.

“Chris said he really felt like something was happening lately. Things were out of joint. We used to talk, you know. He'd say things like that, but he really had his act together. He made sense and what happened really doesn't make sense, man.

“And he believed in God. Do you think if there really is a God, God would let something like this happen? Then, you get guys like Brother Ben, who shit all over people, all for God.”

Jose clapped his hands in one angry gesture.

“You believe in God” he asked Grimaldi.

“Not always,” Grimaldi said.

“If you aren't a cop, what are you doing here?”

“I told you,” Grimaldi said, “Chris died and my life has not been the same.”

Jose ran his fingers through his hair. He grabbed hold and pulled, letting out a cry.

“People die, Jose.”

“No kidding. So you're a philosopher.”

Grimaldi laughed.

“You laugh. Is that how you face things like this? He was my friend.”

“Nobody told me I always asked the right questions and that I was always good with people,” Grimaldi said.

“Ain't nobody good with people around here,” Jose said.

“Somebody killed Chris,” Grimaldi said, finally.

“It doesn't make any sense,” Jose said. “Everybody I know wanted Chris alive. He was going to be some kind of savior for the school. Coach Prygocki made no secret about it. He virtually paid him off to come to St. Benedict's. If the school won a state championship, there was no way the diocese would close it.”

“Who's Johnson?” Grimaldi asked.

“Johnson is a man of God,” Jose said. “He was different about Chris. He saw that Chris was searching. When the priest left, Johnson knew Chris needed some guidance. He tried to give it to him.”

“At first, we thought he was gay,” Jose said, referring to Johnson. “You know, picking up unsuspecting youths and doing the deed. That wasn't it. But there was something incestuous about Chris and Johnson.”

“The experience,’ Johnson would tell him and no one else, ‘Do it for the experience.’”

Grimaldi waited.

“It was funny. Chris would talk, like he had things all figured out.”

Grimaldi studied Jose, now. His round face had grown lean. Every word he said required effort and the strain showed.

“He said he was going to be a priest. That made some people really nervous. But not Johnson. For Johnson, people were meant to be what God meant them to be.

“Trying to be something else would only make your life miserable. If your life was miserable, the people around you would be miserable.

“Chris use to tell me that Johnson didn't know what he talking about. If you tried to be who you were meant to be people freaked. His aunt almost had a bird. Coach Prygocki acted as if he accepted it, but you could tell he wasn't happy.

“I think he thought Chris was not only going to win a state championship but get that scholarship and maybe take him along for the ride.

“The person who made the difference for Chris was Father Lemay. The man could play hoop, and could he talk. Even Johnson would keep his mouth shut around Lemay. But he was a fake. You could say he had us going for a while. But then he disappeared. Then we all knew he was full of shit.

He paused.

“When he didn't come around again, we all knew he was full of shit.

Jose stood up and started pacing.

“He'd talk like he was going to be around forever and the next thing you know he's gone. The little voices start. Lemay left because he couldn't live up to what he was saying. He couldn't handle being celibate, no woman, you know. Some one else says, it wasn't a woman, he liked boys. Your head starts to spin, you know.”

He looked at Grimaldi.

“You know,” he said and pounded his forehead with the palm of his hand, once, twice.

“But it's true, Chris and I loved him. He was a Christian. He was an inspiration. We talked about love and respect, not the sex thing. After a while you get over the pain and the days go on and on. But there is a part of you that holds back, that can't trust.

“Lemay prepared us for a lot of things, but not his leaving, and yet, we hear him sometimes, we hear his voice during the day and we feel better.”

He paused and when he started talking again his voice was soft. Grimaldi could see the teenager was holding back tears.

“It was like that with Chris. He could hear the priest. At first, he believed what others were saying, that the priest had run off. But then he wasn't so sure. He was convinced something else had happened. He was on to something big, he told me once. I'd say, ‘Yea, Yea.’ But he really believed he was on to something.

“You know, I hear Chris's voice now, sometimes, and I believe him. He's dead, but I hear him. I talk with him. It helps me get over things. The days are going to start being the same and he's going to be gone. I'd be lucky if I remember him, but if I heard his voice ...

“Everybody says, ‘We will never forget him.’ Bullshit.”

Jose dropped his head and the tears flowed.

Again, Grimaldi wanted to go to him and comfort him.

“Bullshit. Bullshit,” the boy said.

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