

Chapter XX

Grimaldi drove back to his office, past the burnt out buildings and fine glass structures, captivated by both the change in environment and the people along the streets.

He liked observing. It was what had made him a good writer and a better reporter.

He had the ability to look without judging, to absorb, letting the image burn itself into his brain, where it would lay until he summoned it as he sat down to write, when it would unfold itself on the computer screen in clear, clean, crisp language.

When things were working well – beyond him, but within his capacity as a writer – the words themselves would help him recall items that he hadn't even realized were there in the first place. After some checking, he would verify these. But there was always the temptation to get with this instinct.

The problem for him now was that in his present circumstances he was having trouble focusing. Too many things were going on, and he wasn't writing anything down.

He would have to take the time to do that, to sit down and let the reporter take over, to write about the dead boy, the invasion of his house, the episode in the rectory; to try and figure out why Chris was where he was, and what happened to Lemay.

At the next stop light he was observing again.

He focused on a tall woman in a short pink skirt and black leather jacket, walking away from a corner grocery holding a brown paper bag in one hand and pulling a child in the other hand. The child had a hard time keeping up.

She walked quickly in her white pumps and white leggings. The tiny figure behind her was indistinct. Then they were gone and the car behind him tooted its horn.

Grimaldi dialed Paradis' number.

“Thought I'd find you at your desk,” Grimaldi said.

“Don't give me that crap,” Paradis said.

“A reporter who was worth anything would be out on the street,” Grimaldi countered.

“The only thing I ever learned from you was to sit on my duff and let somebody else to the work.”

“That wasn't me. That was your journalism professor.”

Paradis snickered.

“The only thing I've learned about the kid's death is that there were no drugs on him or in him,” he said. “What about the other thing?”

“I'm still thinking about it,” Grimaldi said.

“I catch you at a bad time?” Paradis asked.

“Remember, I dialed you.”

“You sound distracted.”

“I'm composing.”

“Time to make a comeback.”

Grimaldi laughed.

“Let me know if anything comes up. I got to go.”

Grimaldi started making notes. He included the woman at the scene of the murder, and stopped. Had he told the chancellor and lawyer about her? Could she be found? He needed more information.

Then he regretted hanging up on Paradis, not because he was afraid of being rude. He had forgotten to pick the reporter's brain.

He wrote down a few questions to ask the next time they talked.

What was the motive? If no drugs, what then? What were his ideas? Did he have a theory; something must be circulating back in the Chronicle? Down at the police station?

He ached to know what the others were thinking. Some of his best leads came out of hearsay that in the end held the kernel or core of the truth.

He dropped his pen and grabbed a second sheet of paper, slid out from his desk and began pacing.

Nobody kills the bearer of good news, he thought. What if this kid were on to something else? What if he were onto the killer, of say, Lemay?

There was something else at work here. If there was anything that he had absorbed lately it was the murder scene. Was it time for something to emerge from the foggiest? It was just a matter of time. He felt it. The he could stand up and slap himself on the forehead and say, that was it. It was there all the time.

He sat down at the desk and wrote, ``time."`

Then he flipped through phone messages.

The chancellor had called. His messages always had an air of urgency, so when Grimaldi called over and the chancellor asked him to come right over, he was surprised.

``This is an item of some delicacy," the chancellor began. ``Please have seat."`

Grimaldi had learned years ago not to press, but to let things unfold. No sense in trying to anticipate what was on someone's mind.

Now, as he was asked to take a seat in the familiar arrangement, a sense of amusement crossed over him. A smile creased his face.

“As you know, our schools aren't doing well and something must be done to stop the financial hemorrhaging,” the chancellor was saying. The tall man pressed the tips of his fingers together to collect himself.

Grimaldi bit his lip to stop from laughing.

“In other words, if we stay in the school business in the city, we lose every time because the school carries a substantial subsidy. If we get out of the city, people will accuse the church of abandoning its tradition role of ministering to inner-city kids.

The chancellor looked into Grimaldi's face.

Grimaldi waved him off.

“Just a little tickle in my throat,” he said.

“This is a difficult decision, but the diocese is going to close the school. We fear the worst, not only because of this situation but because we have already entered negotiations for the purchase of property for the creation of a middle school. It's impossible to keep any of this quiet much longer. The subject will come before a local board of education at their meeting later this month.”

Grimaldi read somewhere that the gesture of forming a pyramid of the hands by placing the fingers tips together signified power, control. He wished he had some control now.

Chancellor turned to him.

``What do you suggest?"

``I think I need that water now," Grimaldi said.

Chancellor got up to get him a glass.

Grimaldi was thinking quickly now and slowly he was able to focus. By the time his drink arrived, he was thinking clearly.

``This is a tough call for me," he said. ``I used to go there."

The chancellor smiled a thin smile.

``Has anything been done formally?" Grimaldi asked. ``I mean has an official decision been made?"

Before the chancellor could answer, Grimaldi shot back.

``I mean there is a process here that can be taken advantage of. We need to get some people together, people from the church and the community so that when the story breaks a number of prominent people will understand and be able to explain what is happening.

``People are going to be talking about it. We need to begin the dialogue. We need together a few key people from the diocese, decide how we want to do this, what we want to say, how we want to say it and get whatever it is to the public. Whatever it is, it's not going to be very palatable."

``What you are asking," the chancellor said, ``is what has happened? Nothing has happened and it won't happen until the bishop decides what to do."

``Then this group should be involved in the process," Grimaldi said. ``What we have here is crisis management."

He outlined a meeting schedule with times and objectives to coincide with local media schedules. A press conference would be set up for the Friday at 10 a.m. at the chancery.

The chancellor jotted down some figures and phone numbers and passed the slip of paper to Grimaldi.

“Here are some people we should contact,” the chancellor said.

Grimaldi asked him if he thought it would be better for him to call.

“No,” the chancellor said, “you’ll do just fine.”

Grimaldi had to smile himself when he saw the amused expression that crossed the chancellor's face. Sullivan was willing to go along with the ride.

“And the biggest element in this,” Grimaldi said, “is that the funeral of that student is going to happen in the middle of this. We are burying that teenager from the cathedral and thinking of closing the school at the same time.

“Yes, people are going to say the church is abandoning the inner city, running away from the problems, running away from our mission, simply not facing up to the real problems. It's our job to disclose what is happening, to inform, to put what is happening in the best light. Some times exposing it to some light is the only and best thing to do.”

“Sounds to me like propaganda, from a Pulitzer award winner,” the chancellor said, and looked away, bored.

He added, “There is one other thing you should know about and study. It's the plan to regionalize schools. Part of the plan recommends the purchase of an alternative site which can be used to house a regional middle school, and the campus for a regional high school.

“It's not going to happen for a few years. But you should be aware of it. The purchase has been delayed by an unfortunate incident recently.”

Grimaldi absorbed the information.

“An unfortunate incident,” he asked.

“An unfortunate incident,” the chancellor said.

Grimaldi glanced through the window. The sun was low in the sky. He guessed it was about three in the afternoon. He wondered whether or not he could trust the chancellor.

He decided, not yet.

“The bishop is aware of all these things?” he asked instead and felt stupid.

“Of course,” the chancellor said.

“Will you arrange for him to be at the planning session?”

“The bishop doesn't like to be involved in the details. He likes things detailed and planned so that he can put his imprimatur on them.”

The chancellor pointed to a pile of folders on the desk behind him.

“Letters from people who think they have something to say about Catholic schools. Most condemn the bishop to eternity in hell,” the chancellor said.

He smiled grimly.

“It always amazes me how people always look at the short term. They leave no room for the resurrection, so to speak; no room for the risen Christ, for the spirit to take hold and lead them. It always has to be now. I can only imagine what really went through the hearts of the apostles after the crucifixion.

He seemed far away with his thoughts now.

“Hell, if it weren't for a few women, the men would have gone back to fishing,” he said, softly, apparently to no one in particular.

It was Grimaldi's turn to smile. Was this a glimpse at the man and not the official position of the Church?

“Take them with you,” Sullivan said.

He picked up an armful of folders and handed them to Grimaldi.

“I'll have the school plan and the file on the acquisition of the new middle school properties sent over to your office, along with the additional letters,” he said.

By the time Grimaldi got to the letters, the school plan had arrived. He was reminded about Sullivan's quip about the women and the apostles and had to stop a moment.

The statement had ramifications for his own life. If it hadn't been for Katie, he'd still be a pagan. But he let the rest of the thought trail off. He had a pile of papers to get through.

The first few letters should have been burned, he concluded. They were simple, misdirected, impudent, and hateful.

If he had received them while he was at the Tribune, he would have been obligated to turn them over to the ombudsman who would have contacted the authorities. The same way the administration would have hired an armed guard.

Prominent people wrote, too. He recognized the names. You'd think they would have more sense – if not that, at least some sense of propriety. What would these letter writers have been like at the crucifixion? he asked himself.

He set the letters aside about a third of the way down the pile and picked up the school plan. The photo inside the cover told him more that he wanted to know. The site for the middle school was indeed the factory where the homeless man was killed.

Grimaldi began dialing Paradis.

If Paradis couldn't get the go ahead to investigate now, things had progressed far enough that there had to be a cover up.

Grimaldi needed more information. Maybe he could get Paradis to share his files. Maybe it was time to get to the former superintendent of schools.

His gut feeling kept telling him something more was at stake. The high school students had felt it. He remembered the young girl who was decimated by Chris's death. Jose, too.

And why in hell would an attractive and intelligent woman like Agnes Brown, someone who seemed to have things together in her life, stop to tell him about her past with Johnson? What was going on with Johnson anyway? He made a point of it to find him.

When could he go home? he asked himself.

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In the end he really didn't have a clue. Except for the fact that the factory killing had always intrigued him, and now the death of this teenage boy had complicated his life, time had passed and he was learning to live without Katie. Well, not entirely without her, but at least without her physical presence.

Even for him, what he was about to do was very strange. There wasn't a connection that he could see between the things that were happening, anyway. Maybe it was burnout of a kind or maybe that he was just itching to get back to newspaper work.

He dialed the phone.

“Hello,” the voice at the other end of the connection said.

“Father Sullivan,” Grimaldi said, “I know that you're busy, and I hate to bother you at a time like this. We all like our privacy, so I ordinarily wouldn't bother you at home, but I was wondering if you'd like to play a little hoop. I could get some guys together. We could play one on one. Whatever. The gym at the school isn't in the best shape, but it will do.”

There was a long silence.

“Grimaldi, Grimaldi,” Sullivan said. “You're a damned fool. But I'll take you up. Tell me when. To tell the truth, the school has a great gym. I slip down there once in a while to shoot some hoop myself.”

“How's about tomorrow afternoon after the school meeting?”

Agreed.

He would get Paradis and a few of the guys from the school.

“Bring some body with you,” Grimaldi told the chancellor.

“Just me and my sneakers,” Sullivan said.

“The bishop doesn't play hoop, does he?” Grimaldi said and laughed.

“I can't remember when the old man got any exercise,” Sullivan said. “But at one time he was one helluva tennis player.”

“See you tomorrow,” Grimaldi said and hung up the phone.

He started dialing Paradis.

He smiled.

There was still something sacred about sport, regardless of billion dollar salaries.

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