

Chapter XXI

Paradis was out so Grimaldi left him a message to meet him at the deli. He'd be there until about one thirty, and then he could be reached back at the office.

Grimaldi needed to get with Paradis to expand on this theory about Lemay. It was time, he felt. Everything fit. The school plan, Lemay's disappearance, the Brown killing. It was a hunch, but it was the right one.

The announcement from the diocese about the school closing, his second order of business, was premature. The planning group hadn't met. But he still felt things were out of control.

They were being talked about, that made him feel better, but they were still out of control. Too much last minute posturing.

Beside that, he guessed, he was well on his way to losing his job: If he didn't like the way things were going, then, chances were, someone else didn't like the way they were going, too.

Grimaldi wondered if they'd just let him wither and fade away in his office, or whether they'd actually let him go, fire him, despite having a contract.

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®FL- A light rain was falling as he stepped outside the chancery. For a moment, he stopped and let the rain fall on him. The coolness was refreshing, especially after being in the heat regulated and overly dry building all morning. He closed his eyes. Rather than wetness and the dampness, it was the coolness that he reveled in. He let it permeate his being and stopped.

When he opened his eyes, the sight of a wet sidewalk and rain drops on the bare, brown branches gave him a chill. The wetness was back.

He'd always intended to attend noon Mass, ever since he started the job. The reality was he hadn't been but once. Today he turned and headed over to the cathedral. He grabbed the huge door knob of the 15-foot-high wooden door with its bas relief figures expecting heavy resistance, but the door swung open easily.

He was waiting and absorbing.

Twenty minutes later, he took away some advice about handling stress on the job, from the priest's homily, a bit of nostalgia for the Old Testament, the words of Christ to his disciples about evangelizing, and the bread that give eternal life.

As he walked down the road to the deli, Grimaldi flipped through a copy of last Sunday's bulletin. Typically, he was a bulletin reader. Whenever he attended Mass away from home, he picked up the church's bulletin and read it.

On business trips and vacation with Katie, it was the same: He read bulletins. He folded this one and stuck it in his jacket pocket and slipped behind the chancery where he picked up his car. Paradis might already be waiting.

It wasn't until he had driven out of the lot and out onto to Main St. that he heard the voice behind him.

“Grimaldi, don't panic. Everything is going to be fine. Take the next right onto Lexington and follow that through the next five lights. We've got a lot to talk about, and I just really don't know where to start.”

He recognized the voice immediately.

``Johnson, I don't know if you take me for a damned fool. But I'm getting sick of these impromptu visits."

``Grimaldi, we've got a lot more in common than you realize. Besides I'm not holding a gun to your head."

``How do I know that, especially after your visit to my home?"

``That was necessary. You were the only one who was around for the killing, or at least that is what we thought, so we had to find out if there was something else you knew."

``Bullshit, no body just goes through somebody else's house without lawful direction."

``You've got a lot to learn, Mister."

Johnson directed him up Main, past the deli where Grimaldi was certain Paradis was waiting, down Stratford and into an area of the city Grimaldi had never visited before.

Trees and ranch-style homes gave way to a barren stretch of apartment buildings, brick, modular design, stacked against a treeless, shrub less, dusty terrain.

Johnson instructed him to take the next left. As he turned, Grimaldi noted the white sign posted on the street corner: ``Welcome to Majesty Gardens, a housing project erected in 1965 under the leadership of William X. Howell, Jr."

``Pull into the spot by the dumpster and wait for me to get out. I don't want you to do something stupid and hurt yourself."

Grimaldi drove slowly and as he did people emerged from the block like structures and circled the car. They reminded him of sea animals and the structures their

other worldly domain. These people were like the big, wide-eyed creatures that would check him out as he scuba-dived in different places.

Part of him repelled the intrusion, the other part was curious.

“Dealing drugs,” Johnson said. “It’s the only way for most of them to make a living around here. Unless, of course, you decide to sell your body.”

When Johnson jumped out of the back seat, the people redirected their attention to the cars cruising up the street. There was a long line of them.

“Come on,” Johnson said, and Grimaldi could felt compelled to join him. There was nothing stopping him from starting the car and driving away.

“The cars you see all up and down this street,” Johnson said, “they’re drive by people who work downtown. They could be executives, clerks, city workers, or politicians. It’s their lunch hour and they need a hit.”

Grimaldi listened and tried to set aside the stink from the dumpster.

“What’s the matter? You never smelled good home cooking,” Johnson said and slapped him on the back.

“You should try living in one of these stink holes. These people would be better off living in the sewer, like those Mutant Ninja Turtles.”

Johnson’s eyes jumped from Grimaldi to the dumpster to the buildings to the road.

As he watched Johnson – a short, square man, even shorter and squarer than Grimaldi remembered, wearing black canvas high tops and black sweats with a Chicago Bulls jacket – Grimaldi caught a glimpse of some commotion down by the street.

It started with somebody hollering and then some silent motioning. People moved back to the houses.

Then, he saw what the cause of commotion was. A police cruiser was making its way down the street, slowly, cautiously. It pulled into a lot across the street. A cop emerged from a building and got into the cruiser that and together they drove off.

``Changing of the guard," Johnson said.

``Cop gets here early in the morning, sits all morning in a little room watching television, while all these people stand around and sell drugs. Not it's time for lunch. After lunch, somebody else will show up and do the same thing.

Johnson pointed up and down the street.

``You got people staked out all along here. The people in the windows with the hats are lookouts. It's not very imaginative, but it gets the job done. Drugs, it is the business that keeps this place in the money.

``Now, these gentle people here," Johnson said and threw his arms out, ``these people are bullish on America."

Several young men in Bull's regalia had emerged from the closest building and taken positions around Johnson and Grimaldi.

``This here is Mr. Grimaldi," Johnson said. ``He is a friend and he is to be treated as such. Mr. Grimaldi and I have a lot to talk about. I'm sure you all understand."

Johnson turned to Grimaldi and beckoned for him to follow.

``There are people here who do their best. Sometimes that means selling drugs or sex. Take Melinda, for example."

A car pulled up to the curb and a woman in a red turban and black spandex pants went out to it.

The occupants of the car and the woman exchanged some words. A hand emerged from the window of the car. The hand from the car and hers touched for a brief moment. The car drove off.

A second car slowed to a crawl and Melinda went over to it. As she did, Johnson left the protective circle and beat her to it.

“Leave now or I’ll write down your license plate,” Grimaldi heard Johnson yell.

The car sped off.

“What you do that for?” the woman said. “You dumb ass?”

“I’m not ruining nothing,” Johnson said. “Look at you. You don’t have nothing better to do than stand around all day on curbs.”

People howled.

A school bus pulled up and elementary school kids dressed in Catholic school uniforms jumped down from the step.

A group of women had congregated to meet them. They kept their distance from the others who were howling at Melinda and Johnson. The women meeting the children were older, too old to be the children’s mothers, Grimaldi thought.

As the kids got off the bus, they didn’t head directly for the women. They ran to Johnson.

“Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson.”

A little boy with short cropped hair climbed up into Johnson’s arms.

“The Bulls are the best,” the child said.

“Christ is the best,” Johnson said, “but he don't jam like Jordan.” The man extended his hand just above the boy's head. The boy reached up with an open hand and smacked it.

The bus pulled away. The women called to the children. The children went to the women. Most of the children looked back over their shoulders to Johnson.

The drug seller kept up a constant banter about how Johnson was taking bread out of her and her children's mouths.

“The food you give them is like dust,” Johnson yelled.

“Angel dust,” a voice from the crowd yelled.

“It's chokes them like this dry dirt in the summer does,” Johnson continued. “It chokes them and stunts their growth.”

She screeched and danced around him.

“What kind of bread do you sell,” she asked him, loudly.

“Wonder bread,” another voice from the crowd yelled.

People howled.

“The bread of life,” Johnson said. “You eat it and you will never be hungry.”

“You bring some of that bread to my house,” she screeched. “And then you try some of my bread. It's warm and moist. You can't get enough of it.”

“I already did,” another voice yelled.

Melinda walked over to Grimaldi. She was abysmally thin.

“Fi' dollars gets you all you can eat,” she said.

Grimaldi looked at Johnson.

“She's talking about the worst drug of all.”

“He don't know nothing,” she said to Grimaldi.

“Fi' dollars gets you a blow job. Bing bang.”

Grimaldi stood there.

“Fi' dollars,” she said.

He wanted to give her the money so she would get away from him.

“You are a funny man,” Johnson said, turning his attention to the children who were straggling behind the women.

“The women came out here to get the children. They are fighting for their dignity, and there are too few of them. They are scared. People die here. Two weeks ago a fourteen-year-old girl got off the school bus on the corner and, bang, that was it. Drive by shooting.”

Grimaldi remembered Chris laying on the cold sidewalk.

“Majesty Gardens,” he said.

“I thought you said these people were helpless,” Grimaldi added.

“For the most part,” Johnson said. “But I didn't think you were stupid. Where there's drugs there's trouble. Look at the buildings. You see people looking out the windows. You think their doing it for their health? They're working for the drug bosses. This is big business, capitalism gone mad. Cops come around here, everybody knows before they get close enough to do cop stuff. For lack of a better term, this is prime real estate. The drug Lord's make the investment. They have the money. They get the guns. The more guns, the more real estate.”

“I caught the figures,” Grimaldi said.

“Dressed in silver and black,” Johnson said.

Grimaldi nodded.

“They call themselves the Raiders. They are mean and ugly. That's what they are.”

“What about the Bulls?” Grimaldi asked.

“Like Michael Jordan, sweet and tough,” he said. “They know how to get the job done and make it look pretty. It may take sometime to get the team to gel, but we're going to gel and watch out.”

As they were talking, one of the watchers shrieked. Another waved. The group at the curb dispersed.

Less than minute later a blue and white squad car drove down the street. As the car passed, Grimaldi could see inside. The occupants had a vacant, disinterested look.

“They are beat before they get here,” he said.

Johnson waved and the woman in the passenger seat lifted a finger in acknowledgement. He turned to the driver. The car pulled over to the curb and the window came down.

Johnson poked his head inside. Grimaldi strained to hear. After a spot of silence, he picked up some laughter.

“That's right,” Johnson said as he emerged. “We're going to have these streets cleaned up before the year's out. It's some thing you can't do alone. But it's also something nobody downtown cares about.”

The car pulled away from the curb and the window went up, slowly. Both the car and the window appeared to be on an electronic track. Somebody was pushing the button for the window. He wondered who was pushing the button of the car.

“These are our kids,” Johnson said. “They are our people. And their inheritance has been sold out. Now he's mortgaged the future. Reagan did it. Bush ain't no better.”

His voice rose.

A few of the Bulls added “Amen's” and “all rights.”

“But we aren't going to let that happen, are we.”

“No going to happen,” the chorus sang.

“No, it's not going to happen. Because he's right here inside of us. Each one of us. God is right here. If people knew that, don't you think they'd be running down her to see God? Of course, they would be. We just have to let them know. We have to remind them. But we have to remind each other of who we are and what we are about.”

“Who are we,” he yelled.

“The sons and daughters of God,” the chorus answered.

“What are we about?”

“Building the kingdom.”

“Amen,” Johnson said.

He pointed to Grimaldi.

“Come with me.”

They entered a brick building in the first block they came to. Johnson held the door for Grimaldi. Grimaldi hesitated. Did he trust Johnson? That wasn't so much the problem. He wondered if he trusted himself. This guy had kidnapped him and now he is following into building that held who knows what.

He had no doubt it was the Bulls under Johnson's leadership who had accosted him that night. Could he be sure? He didn't know and that was what bothered him. His doubts were not strong enough to keep him from going inside.

Now, it was the smell of urination that accosted him. Condoms and syringes commingled on the second floor landing.

The thought of children being exposed to this, daily, struck him even harder than the putrid smell.

Johnson opened the door to the third floor landing.

“The poor are not necessarily nice people,” he told Grimaldi. “Would you be living under these circumstance?”

“Hope reigns eternal,” Grimaldi said.

“Your humor hasn't escaped you,” Johnson replied. He motioned for Grimaldi to come inside.

The concrete block walls on either side of him were painted green and the floor was covered with a threadbare, but passable, blue rug. The overpowering stench from the hallway gave way to a deodorized, disinfectant smell, which met and overpowered the stench.

“Johnson,” Grimaldi said, “I appreciate all this. But I've got an appointment that I'm already late for. If I don't get there people will become suspicious.”

He didn't know why he said it.

“You may never get another chance like this,” Johnson said.

He knocked on the first door on the left. The clasp over the eye hole clicked open and shut. Someone began unlocking, first one, then two, then three, then four, locks.

A round-face woman in a flowered smock greeted them.

She kissed Johnson and hugged him.

She took Grimaldi's hand.

“Come in, come in,” she said. “Any friend of Mr. Johnson's is a friend of ours.”

Johnson introduced the woman, but Grimaldi didn't catch her name. He was looking further into the room. At least fifteen children under the age of two were in what was supposed to have been the living room. There were infants in cribs, toddlers in playpens. The ones that were old enough to look up at the visitor. Some ran to the closest side of their playpens, dropped their toys, and opened their arms. One little boy climbed over the side of a playpen and ran into Grimaldi's arms.

“Cameron, don't be a pest,” the woman said and laughed.

“I don't mind,” Grimaldi said and asked, “I'm sorry. I didn't get your name.”

“Aunt Betty,” she said. “People call me Aunt Betty.”

“Betty takes care of these children when the mothers and some fathers are working. She is part of a cooperative program we've begun where people come together to solve their problems. We have to support each other or else we'll be overtaken by criminals in the streets outside.”

“I make two dollars a day for the babies and three for the toddlers. Cecelia, next door, watched the older kids when they come home from school.”

Each room opened to the kitchen, where Aunt Betty prepared food. A small television sat on the counter. The quiet dignity of the place impressed Grimaldi.

Aunt Betty explained some of her needs, cribs for the babies, shoes for the toddlers. She said it would be nice to have the some snacks because most of the children ate in the shelter down the street every night, despite the fact that their parents worked.

“Nobody lives on the wages they make,” she said.

A statue of the Blessed Mother sat squarely in the center of the kitchen table. A small plant grew at the statute's base.

“Grimaldi pointed to it.

“We pray here, Mr. Grimaldi,” Aunt Betty said. “This is a sanctuary, this is holy ground.”

She pulled a crucifix out from her shirt.

“If he don't help us, nobody will,” she said, holding up the object for Grimaldi to see.

The apartment where Cecelia lived was next on the tour. Johnson knocked and the same process began – eye hole, locks – but this time the woman was tall and thin. She greeted Johnson with a hug and a kiss and turned to Grimaldi for the same treatment.

Like the first apartment, this one was immaculate. But it was missing children – the noise and messiness. Cecelia Ruiz turned off the vacuum cleaner and rolled it off to one side.

“The older elementary school children come here,” she said. “Also, some junior high and high school students, who help with the younger kids.”

Grimaldi walked through what had been a bedroom and opened a door.

Ruiz crossed the living room.

“This,” she said, “is the workroom. The older students learn some basic skills and make a few dollars mending and creating new clothes. Of course, that's only after they finish with their homework.”

The room held six ancient sewing machines; bolts of fabric were pushed up against the far wall. A converted bureau displayed threads, buttons and other notions.

“The way we look at it,” Johnson, “is that this is warfare and these are our weapons.”

Ruiz went to a wardrobe and swung it open. Grimaldi watched as she displayed napkins, doilies, white dress shirts, pot holders, school clothes. Each item was arranged neatly in compartments.

“Vendors take most of these items downtown along Main Street and sell them. Other money is used to buy more materials and to help parents purchase items needed at home.

“This is fairly straightforward. The money is hardly enough to keep things going. If it weren't for the cheap labor – so to speak – it wouldn't work. But for experience, the positive experience, these kids are having, coming to see their own self-worth, it's all worthwhile, and all illegal. But we are working on getting non-profit status through an attorney downtown. And we need zoning changes.

“Our biggest obstacle, which should come as no surprise, but apparently does to most people, is drugs. As long as people in power ignore what's happening right outside, it's going to be a battle. But we're happy with the progress we're making.”

Johnson thanked Cecelia for her time and walked Grimaldi outside. The bright sunlight stung Grimaldi's eyes. He shaded them as he followed Johnson through the grassless lawns, cracked sidewalks, littered street, and glass-strewn pavement.

As they arrived at the car Johnson began to lecture.

“What you see here is the beginning of a revolution. Go into those other buildings, you might find two families working together. The rest are good people, fallen on hard times, fallen people. Hard times make people sacred, scared people are ugly.

“They have to realize they have choices. We try to give them choices. I know the choice is between good and evil. They don't know that yet. Nobody knows – not the politicians, not the middle people, not the consumers, not the teachers. If anyone does, it's the drug dealers. That's why they're got the power.”

Grimaldi watched as best he could, but the sun was in his eyes and it hurt.

“One other thing,” Johnson said, “kids from area schools come out here to tutor in the early evening. For a time we've got a truce. This is a war, but we have a truce.

“The power guys don't know what to make of me. They are biding their time. If we can get in far enough before they realize what's going on, then there's no way they can reverse what's happening. The spirit has to have a chance to work.”

Grimaldi's head was spinning. If the drug dealers couldn't make heads or tails of what Johnson was talking about, neither could he. There were a million questions. He couldn't think of one.

He glanced up to see Melissa leading a man into the building across the street.

He listened to a voice inside of him say, “Be still and I am God.”

He closed his eyes and let the stillness take over.

The stillness permeated his being.

For his innermost self, the stillness flowed and he was overwhelmed.

Then he caught a glimpse of a woman leaning over Chris's body. A woman out that late had to be a prostitute. What was she doing there? Who was she? Was it Melissa?

He couldn't think.

Now, in the bright sunlight, standing on the pavement of Majestic Gardens, he let himself go, and the love took him. It embraced Melissa and her client; it spread and moved throughout the street to the dealers and the junkies; it leapt in joy over the children and Auntie and Cecelia; and blanketed Johnson and Watson.

Long after Johnson called him back with another long speech, the feeling lingered. But as happened in the past, the feeling was accompanied with a foreboding. It led him down dark pathways – to Chris's death, the death in the factory, the opening and closing of doors in the rectory, the night in his home, and intimations of Lemay's demise.

“What does Father Lemay have to do with all of this,” Grimaldi asked Johnson before getting into his car.

“Lemay had the vision. He saw all of this coming. Then, he left. He disappeared. No one saw that coming.”

“And Chris. What did he have to do with Lemay?”

“Chris thought that he might have had a calling to the priesthood. Lemay nurtured that thought. We were all pretty good friends.”

“Does a friend just pick up and leave?”

Johnson shrugged and continued talking.

“Chris's aunt didn't like the idea, though. She knew he could be a big success, and that's something she craved. It was all going to be different with him. He was going to have a good life, not like hers. Well, she's got a pretty good life. Anyway, she didn't like the thought of Chris becoming a priest. She had an ally in Chris's coach.

“There was a tension there, a real tension. I think they were even seeing each other for a while. But the coach, a guy named Prygocki, used to help out around here. Things got too heavy after Lemay left. He pulled out.

“The both of them were trying to make Chris choose. It was too much after Lemay died. He never could reconcile that. Why didn't the guy ever say goodbye? he would ask. He was struggling. Now that I look back, I can see he wasn't handling things very well.”

Grimaldi pulled his car door shut.

He started to ask Johnson one more question, but had to roll down the window.

“What do you think happened that night?” he called to Johnson.

“I've thought a lot about that,” Johnson replied. He said that Chris might have been in the wrong place at the right time. Maybe he saw something and somebody wanted to make sure he didn't tell anybody else about it.

“Or somebody thought they were shooting somebody else,” he said.

“Could it have been drugs?” Grimaldi asked.

“I don't have a clue,” Johnson answered.

Grimaldi pointed at the watch outs dressed in their black and silver jackets.

“You ever have any contact with them?” he asked.

“Once in a while.”

``What do they call themselves?"

``The Raiders."

Was there any way he could find out if there was a connection between the killing and the Raiders?

Johnson said he would try.

As Grimaldi drove away, Johnson slapped the rear fender of his car with an open hand. It wasn't an elaborate gesture, but it reminded Grimaldi that they were in this thing together. There was no use fighting it.

That was a stance miles from where he had been on the way over, before his tour of Majesty Gardens.

The name made him laugh.

The whole day made him laugh.

Did the good guys pull people off the street to make a point? He doubted it, but there was something about Johnson that he trusted. He didn't quite know what, not just yet.

Perhaps it was Aunt Betty in the nursery. Or Cecelia.

He let his thoughts linger for a moment on Cecelia. Another attractive woman. She was as attractive as Chris's aunt-mother.

Back at his office, Grimaldi tried to get some distance from what happened.

He phoned Paradis.

The reporter wasn't in, so he left a message, apologizing for missing the lunch and asking Paradis to call as soon as possible.

He hung up the phone, and then took it off the hook. He closed the door to the office. He picked up a piece of paper and started doodling.

Something was eating at him, and he needed to figure it out before he could work on the press conference. Instead of things becoming clearer, they became blurred.

He listed the things he needed to do.

He didn't know the time of Chris's funeral. He'd call Ms. Watson. From the beginning there was something curious about the woman. He wondered if it were more than that. Was it morbid curiosity on his part? How was she handling this whole thing?

After Katie died, he'd removed himself from most everybody and everything they'd had in common. Was that what Watson was doing?

He wrote her name on the piece of paper.

He knew he was attracted to her, but he just didn't know if he could trust himself, not just yet. How did Prygocki fit into this? What were her real feelings about Chris and Johnson?

What would it be like to kiss her?

He sat back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. He reached into his pocket for a piece of candy and pulled out a piece of paper. It was the bulletin from noon Mass. He unfolded it and looked over it quickly. He saw the old pastor's name listed proudly at the top left corner in a fancy script. Then, just below it, he noticed Prygocki's name.

“I'll be damned,” he said out loud.

Prygocki was a deacon at the church.

He added that fact to the list he was compiling.

Then he phoned the front desk for messages. Paradis had called, so Grimaldi picked up the phone and dialed his number. He apologized again for missing lunch. Something else had come up.

"I'll tell you about someday," he said.

He reminded Paradis that they were supposed to play basketball over at the school gym later that day, around four. Maybe they could have dinner afterwards.

"I'll be there, unless someone drags me away or kidnaps me," Paradis said.

"I've heard of stranger things happening," Grimaldi said and hung up.

He phoned the school and left a message for Prygocki. They'd be at the gym around four. Was he still up for a game of hoop?

He tossed the bulletin into the trash and took a glance at his own list of things.

It took a second for him to sort things out, but he'd drawn a figure on a crucifix. At first, it was difficult for him to see who it was. Then it dawned on him. It was Melissa from Majesty Garden.

A shudder went through his body.

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