

Chapter XXII

The locker room was icy cold. As he laced his high tops, Grimaldi remembered playing archrival, West Catholic, when the city had two Catholic high schools.

The trip was just across town, but school had been canceled that day because of a snowstorm. He, like the others on the St. Benedict's team, figured the game would be called off. It was still snowing at evening.

But Prygocki told them that the game was on West's coach had a tight schedule that year and if the game was called off, it would not be played. In fact, St. Benedict's would forfeit.

The players grumbled a little .But the bus left the school with plenty of time to spare, which turned out to be a good thing, because it took three times as long to get there.

The cold reminded Grimaldi of walking into the Westie's girls' locker room where visiting teams dressed. The heat hadn't been turned on. As the players dressed, their breathing turned to streams of white.

The junior varsity team never got going. They warmed up for a minute and the horn blew signaling the start of the game. They were down thirty points in two minutes.

Grimaldi had always wondered about the heat. Was it something that the Westie's did to make sure they won?

``Coach," Grimaldi yelled to Prygocki, who was changing in the coach's office, ``remember the time we played the Westie's. There was the snow storm and the heat was off in the locker room."

``Hell, that was nothing," Prygocki answered. ``At least we had heated water for our showers. That's something they never got when they came here."

``No kidding,"Grimaldi said.

``No kidding."

Grimaldi felt had. Didn't he know that things like that were always happening? Didn't he know that rivalries weren't simple, artificial barriers made in the mind and fueled by hyper talk and us-versus-them rhetoric?

Prygocki dragged a bag of balls out of the office.

``We've got about two hours before the girl's team takes the floor," he said.

``Where's your buddy, Paradis?"

``He'll be here," Grimaldi said.

Sullivan beat him there. He was dressed in sweats when he walked in. He had a place at the chancery. The three of them were warming up when Paradis showed.

By the time he came upstairs, the others were already engaged in a game of rebound. The person with the ball had to face the other two. If he made the shot he got the opportunity for a free throw and the ball back. If he missed the shot from the floor or the free throw, one of the others got their shot at it and had to face off.

Two points for a field goal. One for a free throw.

Chancellor was up by three points. Next came Prygocki with five. Grimaldi had one.

Sullivan was holding the ball at the top the key.

``The prima donna's here," Prygocki yelled.

``Next point wins," Grimaldi said.

Grimaldi challenged Sullivan, taking way his left side and forcing him to go with his weak hand. The taller man took the challenge. Prygocki met him at the free throw line. Chancellor slammed into him, knocking him to the floor. At the same time as the collision, Sullivan threw the ball. It caromed off the rim into Grimaldi's hands. He lifted a soft shot off of the backboard and through the hoop.

He caught the ball before it touched the ground and tossed it to Prygocki.

``Your ball," he said.

``What are you talking about?"

``Offensive foul."

``No foul," Prygocki said. ``Game's over."

``He creamed you."

``If anyone got fouled, the chancellor did."

``Game," Sullivan said.

They each took a turn from the free throw line.

Prygocki and Sullivan wound up on the same team. Together, they proceeded to hack, slap, pinch, hold, pull and slam their Paradis and Grimaldi around the court.

Every time Paradis and Grimaldi cried foul, Prygocki and Sullivan ignored them.

One the last play of the first game, Prygocki swing around for a hook shot, and as he did, Sullivan hit Grimaldi with an elbow across the bridge of his nose. Grimaldi grabbed his face. Sullivan grabbed the ball which bounced off the front of the rim and dropped it through the hoop.

``Nice game," Sullivan said. He held the ball tucked under his arm left and extended his right hand to Grimaldi.

“Yea,” Grimaldi said, blinking and waiting for the pain to recede.

“As I’ve said,” Sullivan reminded him, “call me Jim.”

“Okay, Jim,” Grimaldi said, “call me Jack.”

The chancellor smiled.

The next game things turned around for Grimaldi and Paradis. They got a few rebounds and they hit their shots.

By the end of the session, both teams were huffing and puffing.

The ancient showers produced a stream of hot water the Grimaldi welcomed.

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The meeting had gone as well as could be expected. Sullivan put on a rare display of self control by letting Grimaldi go and on and on about the importance of attacking the problem, not people; anticipating problems, not thinking that they will just go away; rallying support by focusing on a common goal, not wasting valuable energy by letting it working at cross purposes.

The people around the table seemed receptive, at that is what Sullivan told Grimaldi afterwards, as they stood talking quietly in the oak paneled conference room down the hall from the bishop's office.

“It was your idea,” Sullivan said. “You deserve the credit.”

“If you hadn't got the bishop to back off, and given these people a chance to tackle it, holding a meeting like this wouldn't make any sense. Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Sullivan said.

“Where we go next, I'm not really sure,” Grimaldi said, “but you'll be the first to know.”

He had one question for Sullivan as they started to go their separate ways.

“I know this sounds it's something out of the blue, but is there a policy – official or otherwise – having to do with priests who leave?”

It was Grimaldi's understanding that regularly men still left the priesthood.

“There are a few areas best left alone,” Sullivan said.

Grimaldi felt he could press him on this one.

“Let's just say that for better or worse, the men who leave this diocese are in so many words little better off than dead, especially if they want to stick around.

“We're not really too gracious about it,” he added. “I've heard some threatened that they had better move some place else because they'd be lucky to find work if they stayed.”

Grimaldi appreciated the chancellor for being forthcoming. Perhaps, they were making ground.

“It's different than anything else,” Sullivan said. “These guys have made a promise and going back on that promise is viewed as something irrecoverable. In his heart, the bishop cannot understand it. He would never consider it. How could anyone else?”

“You sound like you might understand better than he does,” Grimaldi said.

“Once a priest, always a priest,” Sullivan said.

“Kabish.”

“Kabish.”

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The old pastor greeted him heartily.

“Come join me, Jack,” he called from his seat in front of the television. He was watching the local news.

The old man had had a good visit with his father.

“It's never easy watching someone die,” he told Grimaldi.

“Because I'm a priest, everyone tells me I have a first class ticket to heaven. I don't think so. When people around you are suffering, it's tough to hold on.”

“I guess it's different after they've been dead for a while,” Grimaldi said.

He saw the pastor look up at him, puzzled.

“I didn't mean it that way. For me, the dead are always around. One way or another they help me get through the days.”

He explained about his wife who had died of cancer just a few years earlier.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” the pastor said.

Grimaldi sat down in front of the television. Dan Rather was reporting on the president's ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. If the Iraqi's didn't comply with his request to leave Kuwait, Bush promised military action.

The deadline had been set for January 1, originally. Then it was pushed up to January 15. Today, Rather said there hadn't been any coalition movement. But the Iraqi's stayed put.

“Why is it when a priest leaves, the ties are completely cut,” Grimaldi asked.

“I don't know,” the old man answered. “I don't know.”

The man looked very small in the big arm chair.

“Of course, there are reasons. But in my mind and heart, through my own experience, these reasons don't make any sense. God would understand. He is love, isn't he? Or is it she?”

They sat in silence.

Rather signed off.

“It's like this war stuff,” the priest said. “Who cares? I get fed up with some people who are so sure. I don't think I could ever be.”

“Take this Prygocki guy He's a deacon here. He's given deacons a good name and God knows they can use the good publicity. Having a married man with a chip on his shoulder breathing down your neck, salivating to be a priest, is really no fun, though.”

“He's been able to pull it off.”

The pastor explained the role of the deacon in the church. Then he began to talk about Prygocki and his work with shut ins, baptism classes, the confirmation program.

“He takes his work with students particularly seriously,” the pastor said. “I think he was pretty broken up over the shooting. It will probably be the last straw before the school closes. It would be just what their waiting for. It's a shame. The church has always had a presence in the inner city. This does not bode well.”

“I'm not surprised that Prygocki has thrown himself into his work the way he has since his marriage broke up,” Grimaldi said.

“As far as I know, his marriage is fine,” the pastor said. “Talks about his wife all the time.”

“I don't think so,” Grimaldi said. “I had a conversation with him two days ago, and he told me they broke up over a year ago.”

The pastor simply looked at him, in that puzzled bird like way with his head tilted to the right.

Grimaldi let it drop.

“You notice anything strange the night of the shooting,” Grimaldi asked.

The pastor laughed.

“You some kind of detective now?” he asked.

“You were right when you said things are different when they are already dead.”

“I was. But while they are alive, there is always the possibility for salvation, for the soul to be saved. Life cannot be measured in days.”

“You're awfully philosophical tonight.”

“No, just practical. God's been good to me. It happened again on the night of the shooting. I'm grateful that I wasn't around. I don't think I could have faced it.

“There was this kid, once a long time ago. He was holding on to life by a thread. We were talking and things were going to be all right, until the police came. That's when he pulled the trigger. I have never been able to forgive the cops – they were there to help but I am convinced they are the reason that kid is dead.

“It's a long story. Except for that episode, I don't think I have ever experienced such pure, unadulterated hate for anyone. It happened. If I were around for this other thing I believe my heart would break.

“No matter,” the pastor said, “there are other people who will have to deal with this once they find out who shot the boy. For one, I think of Prygocki. First he lost a good friend in Lemay, and now the boy.

“Temperance, my friend, is a virtue. But it's much easier to rely on God's good grace to get you through.”

The old man rose slowly from his arm chair and crossed the room. Grimaldi knew it was time for his evening visit to the church to make sure things were in order.

As he passed the stairwell and the kitchen door, Grimaldi knew he had about ten minutes to get to the front office.

He started with the files in the file drawer of the oak desk. He expected the desk would be open, and that there would be two sets of handwriting – one the pastor's and the other Prygocki's.

It was obvious that the pastor's writing was much more practiced. The deacon's showed the press of time, slanted wildly forward. He checked the signatures to confirm his suspicions. He was correct.

When he came to the extensive file on schools he pulled it and brought it with him upstairs. He heard the back door open as he passed the kitchen.

“Schools seem to be all the rage,” Grimaldi said to himself and closed the door behind him. “I've got to find out about all the fuss.”

The lamp on the table by his bed was vintage 1935. It cast a dull yellow stream that must have been a wonder at one time. Then he remembered the arm lamp attached to Lemay's bed.

The light shone brightly on the open folder. Grimaldi started reading. The first item, a photocopy of a Tribune article, reported about a cooperative program that enlisted the aid of Catholic school students to empower residents of Majesty Gardens. Lemay, Prygocki, and Johnson huddled on the lawn of one of the block buildings, before a group

of students. In the article, Johnson talked about raising people's consciousness and breaking down barriers between different ethnic and racial communities.

Words in the article had been highlighted in blue or underlined in black. Grimaldi looked for a pattern, but there didn't seem to be one. As he read on, he noticed more and more of the articles contained words that had been underlined, circled, or highlighted.

On the same day that Lemay disappeared, there was an announcement that the regionalization of the Catholic school system in the city had fallen through.

There was a quote from the fiscal officer and the bishop's secretary.

They would continue to study the situation, however, for the moment; it looked as if nothing was going to happen to upset the status quo.

Grimaldi wondered if the plan had collapsed because Lemay left. What kind of role would he have had in the school?

The clippings from the time of the announcement covered St. Benedict's, extensively, and Chris Brown, too.

Occasionally, an article about Johnson popped up. Prygocki was hardly represented.

More than not the articles had to do with the school office and its attempts to regionalize. Except for the location of the new school, which had been purchased by a third party and would be donated to the church, many of the details were familiar to Grimaldi.

Enrollment was down, parents had rallied to try and raise enrollment along with an endowment. But the efforts had fallen short. It just didn't look like there would be enough students to carry the school far enough into the future to guarantee solvency.

He read for a long time, pacing himself, occasionally dozing, waking and falling back to sleep.

One time, he thought he heard someone at the door.

Once he felt like he was in the presence of someone, as if he had been summoned to the room to sit and absorb some simple but profound truth that the clippings in themselves could not convey. Each of the clippings was given anew significance by objects in the room, by the photos, for example, and each bit of knowledge was accompanied by an increasing dose of danger.

Grimaldi toured the room, looking at things, and as he did, he was taken somewhere else.

Once he was at the opening ceremony of a project meant to bridge the difference between the Bulls and the Raiders. Johnson was there directing, participating, pleading and scolding.

Prygocki hid behind the buildings. The only time he emerged he did so with Melissa. Grimaldi was shocked.

Prygocki had his arm around her shoulders and laughed and pointed in a derisive fashion. His comments were directed at Johnson. Then he saw Lemay and disappeared behind the buildings, fright deepening in his eyes. The last Grimaldi saw of him, the coach was looking over his shoulder imploring the woman to walk faster and faster. She was saying, "There's no hurry where we're going, honey."

Lemay stood silently by. He watched as Johnson did the talking. Once in a while, he bent low to listen as the children came to him. He faced them, at their level, stooping

to be with them. He would whisper something to them, and they'd go away from him a little saddened, yet, if this was at all possible, a little happier, too.

He never spoke to the adults.

When Grimaldi woke in the morning, he was in Lemay's bed. He went directly to the clippings that were left in the bureau and finished looking through them. When he finished, he knew he was on the verge of confirming several of his suspicions.

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