

Chapter XXV

It took Grimaldi a while, but it finally dawned on him that one of the people most decimated by the death of Chris Brown was the pastor.

The old man couldn't believe someone was killed on the grounds of his parish.

“If you could have only seen it, the parish was the crown jewel of the diocese,” he told Grimaldi. “A man would have given his right arm for this assignment. Now you couldn't even get lowest man on the ladder to take it.”

He'd drop his head, the hand he would have given up for the assignment clutching a Manhattan.

One sip and he'd lift his old head, a glimmer in his eye.

“If these walls could speak,” he said.

Grimaldi would laugh, catching the inflection and trying hard to read between the lines. The only things that came to mind were ribald stories of women loose upstairs.

Grimaldi would press the old man for details.

“I imagine they do at times,” he said.

“What's that?”

“Talk,” he would say. “The walls, they talk.”

But Grimaldi learned that it would take more than a few days for there to be enough trust between them for the old man to want to share with him.

That was the peculiar thing about the clergy; they could only talk among themselves. The look meant that he was sorry, it wasn't that you, Jack Grimaldi, were bad company, it was that you simply weren't a priest. How could you understand?

Grimaldi raised his glass in a toast.

“Here’s to a fine man who captured the crown jewel of the diocese.”

They ate dinner in relative silence.

Grimaldi was able to get some answers to questions about Lemay from the old man. Lemay, as it turned out, was a constant house guest of the Prygoekis, before his disappearance and their divorce.

The pastor admitted he liked to hear stories about the renegade, as Prygoeki called Lemay; Lemay was a likable young fellow, he said. Lemay had a way with kids. Pastor thought that he would have brought along a number of vocations if he'd stuck with it.

“Prygoeki seemed to take over when Lemay left. But he really didn't have the same touch as Lemay. If anything, his divorce really contributed to his losing touch with the kids. Until then he was okay.”

Grimaldi thought so.

The pastor never troubled totally trusted anyone who became a deacon.

He confided, “It just never made sense to me that someone was in a position to serve God after serving a woman.”

Grimaldi wondered about Prygoeki. Supposedly he had been seeing Lemay regularly. He wondered if he were the last one to see him alive.

“But a death on the ground of the campus of St. Benedict's,” the old man said, “in my worst moments, I would never have dreamed it.”

It brought back some bad memories for him.

“I won't have believed it if it hadn't happened to me. The winter was a bad one, maybe the one before all the sisters left the school I heard a voice calling, but I couldn't

make out what it was saying. I thought for a moment I really was hearing voices, I was being called. But then I was much younger and had a busy schedule.

“I learned later that Sister Constance had fallen on the ice. She rose early and this day was out salting the ice. Imagine, she was seventy-eight years old, salting the ice. She slipped and broke her hip. All morning long she called out for help. In the cold, she called for help. For two hours, she called for help before anyone came to her assistance.”

The old man cried.

“She was seventy eight years old, salting the ice, fell and broke her hip. What a church we live in, I thought then. I don't know what to think know.”

He wiped the tears from his eyes and laughed.

“Brassy old lady. You didn't want to get caught not eating your food or nipping at the bottle when she was around.”

The episode was a tragedy for him, though.

“I made a pact with myself,” he said. “From that point on I would do my best to make sure nobody had to suffer unnecessarily on these premises. We hired regulars to take care of the grounds – I think the sisters never forgave me for that – and it worked until we ran out of money.”

He raised his glass.

“It didn't make a damn bit of difference. A fourteen year old was killed right outside the front door. My only consolation was that I wasn't here to see it.”

He drank. Grimaldi drank.

“At least she was alive,” the pastor said. “I'll bet the bitch is still alive today.”

They toasted her health.

“But the boy,” he said, “the boy is dead. He might have been anything. He had his whole life in front of him.”

“His whole life,” Grimaldi said.

“If I had my whole life in front of me,” the priest said, “who knows what I might be.”

He brought the glass up in front of his face and swished what was left of his drink around and around. He might have been looking into a crystal ball.

“Once a priest, always a priest,” he said and sighed. “Just think the boy might have been a priest. Colored priests are few and far between around here. All the makings of a bishop.”

Grimaldi recalled the old man had been at Selma with Dr. King. That was the 60s. Maybe the old man had the makings of bishop, he thought. But not in this church, not with this pope.

During the riots, the pastor was called on to be a liaison between the black community and the churches.

He never tired of the old man's story about the cigar-smoking, word-murdering bishop who called together the priests from the inner-city parishes.

The pastor was there sitting up at the head of the table when the bishop cleared his throat and turned to him.

“Father Mallon, what are we going to do about the niggers?”

The old man said he thought he was going to pass out.

“Till this day, I still get flushed,” he'd say. But he could and did laugh about it.

“Those were the old days. And he was an old man, a good man. I don't think he meant anything by those words, but I know we'd never be so forgiving today.

Grimaldi thought for a moment about the new bishop. He hadn't seen him at all, except for the brief meeting that morning. Was this guy capable of the same blunders? Is that why he stayed out of the light?

Dinner wound down with a few more stories. And Grimaldi knew it was time to go when the old man pushed his dish away and asked for coffee.

“If these walls could speak, what would they say?” Grimaldi asked.

The old man smiled.

“They'd tell you about the retired pastor who resided here when I arrived. He drank heavily and he was a mean drunk. There are mean and happy drunks. He was a mean one. I couldn't do enough to keep him off me back, the whole time we lived together. Eight years of petty, back-biting. Once I told him I ordered a helicopter. I was sick of the traffic in the city. I bought a small one to get around. He thought I was crazy, but he didn't know whether to believe me or not. He'd ask me where I was going to keep it. I told him on the roof. He said the roof would never hold it. I called a friend and had him call the priest to assure him that the roof would hold. The friend called and said he was from Acme Helicopter Sales, that it was true Father Mallon had bought a helicopter, and that the engineering report did indeed verify that the roof would support a helicopter. Then, I had somebody else call to confirm that it was being delivered in a day or two. You know, the helicopter never arrived, but he never brought it up again.

“Of course, there was another episode with the Girls Scouts. I fabricated the whole thing. You see, he told me when I came here never to let the help see me drink.

Obviously, he lived by this rule because he would take his empty bottles down by the school and dump them. There were thousands at one time. So I had another friend call to say the Girls Scouts were on an ecology kick and they found the bottles. They assured him that it was simply terrible that such a thing had happened on the grounds of St. Boniface's, and they would not let the issue rest until they found the culprit. They were having the bottles dusted for finger prints. Things were pretty quiet after that."

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