

Chapter XXIX

Sure enough when they got to the cemetery, Prygocki stood over the casket by the hole in the ground. He was vested, which made sense to Grimaldi. How else were the people going to tell the minister a part from the crowd? He wouldn't be in blacks and a collar. He needed the robe, dalmatic, to let the people know he stood apart.

Prygocki went through the prayers quickly, precisely, as if he were leading a class through a series of rote learning exercises; as if he had other things on his mind.

When he was through, he went over to the family, who were now standing in the cold, receiving people. Grimaldi watched as Prygocki said a few words to the grandmother, mother, aunt, and father. Grandmother stood stoically while he addressed her. She said nothing.

Grimaldi imagined what was transpiring. Platitudes, nods, press of the flesh. What sense did it make? After finding his work finished, Prygocki said a few words to some of the people around the family. Then, he made his way over to one of the Raiders. They held a short conversation, with Prygocki gesturing to the state police. The police were stationed strategically around the gathering of people.

A few of the young men came over to Prygocki and his partner. After that things started happening. Aunt/Mother placed a white rose on the casket. The entire family began walking back to the car.

“The Brown family expresses its profound thanks to all those who have come here today to join them in their sorrow, remembering their loved one, Chris. They extend a welcome to all who would like to join them at a reception at the church.”

Aunt guided grandmother by the arm, the rest of the family followed patiently.

A state trooper raised his warlike talkie and began talking hurriedly. By Grimaldi's estimate, the men were outnumbered five or six to one.

Some where a chant began.

``We don't want to know dying no more."''

Grimaldi watched as Prygocki slipped away towards his car, as Nelson began walking over to the Raiders who had begun the chant.

``Brother," Grimaldi heard him say.

``Cool it."''

The short, stocky man raised his arms to embrace the other man when he tumbled to the ground.

Grimaldi turned to see Prygocki lowered the gun and cover it in his sleeve, walk casually the last few steps to his car, start it, and pull away.

Bulls rushed to Johnson. They formed a ring of bodies around him. The Raiders began striking, first at the circle. Then at individual troopers. More shoots were fired.

Grimaldi slipped behind a tombstone. He looked for Paradis and caught a glimpse of him hiding behind a Plymouth Horizon, scribbling in his notebook.

Paradis scribbled and looked up. He scribbled some more. Grimaldi envied him for his notebook. Things were much easier when he just had to record them. He wondered just what Paradis would capture. Would it be anything like they experienced at all.

Did the scribbling include anything about the relationship between Prygocki and Lemay, Lemay and Johnson, Johnson and Prygocki, Chris and anyone of them, anyone of them and Aunt/Mother?

Was there anything about Lemay's disappearance from the church and harsh reality that many men who left the priesthood were figuratively left for dead? Totally cut off after years of service?

Grimaldi watched and envied. At the same time, he was reminded of an ant crossing over a lawn. The reporter caught a glimpse of what was happening in the here and now. It showed up in the form an objective report the next day in the newspaper, sometimes in a news broadcast, but all of it was from such a narrow perspective.

Grimaldi turned away and slumped against the stone. A few more shoots went off. He waited.

Quiet.

In the distance, he heard an ambulance siren, then another and another. As the sound got closer, he remembered the part of his dream that had evaded him for most of the morning. It was the raised arm, vested, and the crackle of the shot that killed Lemay – a shot aimed at his handsome, youthful face, ripping away all the traces of his identity, leaving him alone, to be listed an other number in the genocide of the homeless on America's streets.

The homeless didn't wear dog tags. Maybe they should. They were fighting a battle for the honor of their country and no one was going to give them the time of day for it. They were losers. It reminded him of Vietnam.

In his dream, Grimaldi now saw the face of the person who fired the shots. It was Prygocki. It was a surprise to him when he caught a glimpse of where the shooting took place. He looked up and found himself in a cathedral.

By the time he lifted himself up off the ground, Grimaldi knew he was going back to the cathedral.

He watched in silence as the EMTs strapped Johnson to a gurney and rolled him away.

He caught up with Paradis, who was talking to a captain with the state police.

"You think Johnson's going to be okay?" Grimaldi asked as they walked back to the car.

"Looks pretty hairy," Paradis said.

Grimaldi asked what the police were reporting.

Paradis told him that they had several witnesses who said they saw the leader of the Raiders fire the shot that knocked down Johnson. The Raider was shot in turn by one of the police officers, point blank in the head. He died instantly.

"I don't know if anyone will corroborate this, but I saw Prygocki shoot Johnson," Grimaldi said. "I think we've got our hands full tracking this guy down."

The largeness of the cathedral is what struck Grimaldi as he and Paradis entered. The quiet served to emphasize the vastness of the building and the smallness of the two men, the vaulted ceilings and thick pillars did the same.

Light streamed through the stained glass windows depicting scenes from the rosary – the ones who caught Grimaldi's eye now were the ones having to do with the crucifixion, the Sorrowful mysteries.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the darker places. As he was becoming more sensitive to the light, Paradis tugged at this arm.

Grimaldi looked up towards the sanctuary, where he saw the figure, face down before the altar. The largest window, with Jesus on the Cross and Mary and St. John looking up at him, loomed overhead.

All morning there had been something nagging at Grimaldi. It was something about the place that bothered him. Now he knew what it was. The cathedral was only complete when there were people inside, lost of people, filling the pews, filling the sanctuary. He wondered if it were some medieval concept of church that he was dealing with. But it only seemed to make sense to him at that moment. There would be no church, so to speak, without people.

Even ones like Prygocki.

Grimaldi caught Paradis's eye and lifted his finger to his lips. Then, he indicated that he would go up the left aisle. Paradis should go up the right one.

He could see by the expression on Paradis's face that the reporter really wanted to stop and talk things over.

Instead, Grimaldi gave Paradis the thumbs up and started walking up away. Grimaldi thought they'd talked too much already. More talk wasn't going to make a difference.

As he approached the sanctuary, Grimaldi waited Prygocki. He was perfectly still and silent before the altar. Grimaldi passed the pillars and lost him momentarily. The closer he got he realized Prygocki was talking very quietly.

The words didn't come to him until he was nearly at the foot of the sanctuary.

“Lord,” Prygocki was saying, “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

This was his own prayer, Grimaldi thought. The thought shook him.

Grimaldi passed the last pillar. When he came out from behind it, Prygocki was gone.

“Behind the altar,” Paradis called to him. I saw him slip behind the altar.

“Get back,” Grimaldi yelled, as the first shot rang out. Prygocki still had the gun. Grimaldi was convinced he'd see him toss it onto the ground by the dead Raider's feet. Robes did wonders for pathological temperament, he thought.

“Prygocki, why don't you just put the gun down and end all this foolishness. The school isn't going to close. You left the meeting before the bishop made up his mind.”

“Grimaldi, I always had you pegged for a loser, ever since you missed the one-on-one in the Springfield game.”

He said it was difficult enough trying to keep the school going with goody-two shoes like Johnson thumping away about the reign of God and working for the Kingdom. Memories of losers weren't something that he wanted around anyhow.

“The kingdom is in a job and being able to feed your family. My kingdom is right here.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Grimaldi watched Paradis slip away into the shadows. If they both couldn't get out of there, maybe one of them could.

“Lemay,” he yelled. “What about Lemay?”

“Ha,” Prygocki yelled and laughed.

“He just didn't understand the delicate balance that exists in the city. You can't be a do-gooder and profit. I wanted all my kids to be perfect. That way we all would come out on top together.”

Grimaldi stepped forward.

“Far enough,” Prygocki said.

Grimaldi took one more step.

“Far enough,” Prygocki said and raised the gun.

“Lemay was a young guy,” Grimaldi said.

“Young, old,” Prygocki answered. “They all take a few and go down. But he went down in style, a true Christian to the end, a goddamned martyr. People loved that guy. He could have had them do anything. Then he gets the idea – We've got to evangelize and concentrate on adults' education. What a cozy idea. He gets a board of professionals together and they decide to close the school and bring all of the schools in the region together in an abandoned factory. Well he got his factory.”

“What did happen there?” Grimaldi asked. He knew Paradis was still in the building, and he wanted him out.

“Lemay, I had to destroy any evidence and stop the transaction. I had this idea after the satanic episodes down river. It was another abandoned factory, another time, worshipers meeting deep in the bowels of the building. If it happened there, why couldn't it happen here? Shoot off his face, messed up his teeth. The rest was easy. I left that up to the rats. I knew if the body had three weeks with rats and moisture and nature to do the

work, the body could have been picked clean. But the best part was that nobody missed this guy. The investigators just assumed it was a homeless person that got involved in the wrong place. I don't even think they did any tests, aside from routine ones. The church never said boo about Lemay."

``No relatives, no friends."

``Once somebody leaves the priesthood, there aren't anymore conversations, at least from what I know, there aren't anymore civil conversations. That person might as well be dead."

``But he didn't leave."

``That was the beauty."

``Once a priest, forever a priest," a voice said from behind Prygocki.

Grimaldi and Prygocki both turned. It was the old pastor. He held his pistol in his right hand, pointed at Prygocki.

Grimaldi broke for Prygocki, but the shot rang out and Prygocki fell to the ground grabbing his stomach. The look on his face was one of surprise, Grimaldi noted.

Grimaldi picked up Prygocki's pistol and handed it tot he pastor.

``Never hurts to know how to use one of these," the old man said.

Grimaldi said he would phone the cops. But Paradis, who ran back inside when he heard the shot, said that he'd already done that.

They all looked at Prygocki.

``You bastard," the priest said.

Grimaldi shook his head.

``I made those free throws in Springfield," he said. ``His mind must have been on something else."

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