

### Chapter III

Jack Grimaldi sat straight up in his chair. He had dozed, felt as if he were going to fall, caught himself, and sat straight up, totally awake. He reached behind himself and massaged the back of his neck. It was stiff from bending over his desk and going through the piles of papers that he needed to absorb to understand the important details of his latest assignment. There was a knot at the base of his skull. Right side.

He was working late at the chancery just down the street from the Cathedral of St. Augustine. Only the rectory was between the two buildings. Behind the chancery were a few other buildings owned by the diocese, an elementary school. The school faced a street that ran parallel to the one that ran in front of the chancery and the cathedral.

Grimaldi was grappling with another public relations problem: Catholic schools. Who would have thought Catholic schools could be so hard to understand? Not, him, or sure. He labored years at Deer Crossing's metropolitan daily, the Chronicle where he was an investigative reporter. He covered real estate scandals, fraud and political intrigue. Nothing escaped his intellect and, some people would say, his sharp pen. But he was finding out differently. Catholics schools, especially when you wanted to close one, the way the current superintendent of schools did, and who by the way had the support of the diocesan fiscal officer.

It was less than a year from the time he started as the first ever communications director of the Deer Crossing Diocese. For the first three weeks he had studied church documents on communications. Then he spent months trying to understand the U.S.

Catholic conference statements on AIDS, condoms, homosexuality, and the death penalty. Lately, he digested the bishops' statements on war and peace.

Nothing had really prepared him for Catholic schools.

Schools were easy when he was at the Chronicle. The diocese closed a school. He reported on it. Who cared about what was said? It was his job to ask the right questions, and that's what he did, asked the right questions. But there was something wrong about asking the right questions in the wrong atmosphere.

The Chronicle had been bought out by a chain, which proceeded to cut staff, bust the union, and break the paper's spirit.

When Bishop Hamilton asked him to give the communications position a shot, he jumped at it. Grimaldi had been thinking about working for the church for a while, after an intense retreat called a Cursillo that challenged him as a layperson to live out his Christian faith through his work and life. But it really was Katie's death that finally did it. Her death, perhaps, was the end of one stage — marriage and a career that had culminated in a Pulitzer for his story about inner-city gangs. End of a stage or not, her death, and what came before it, led him to the big questions.

So he agreed to take the job for two years, the only stipulation being that he would like a crack at the editorship of The Deer Crossing Star, the diocesan weekly if things didn't turn out exactly as planned.

Now sitting with his head in his hands, contemplating the conundrum of Catholic schools, he heard a car whoosh by on the street below his second story office in the chancery building. He could feel the tension lump up in the muscles in his neck. When did he get so sensitive?

Noises like the sound of a car coming up Main Street still reminded him of the incoming fire in Vietnam. He'd hear the missiles coming in, the whistle and whine, sit there and wait for the explosion.

He paused for a moment anticipating, but he heard these words instead: Every one of them, every single car was setting off an explosion in the atmosphere. He laughed.

From his seat, he looked out the window and watched two red tails lights disappear. When had he become a convert to the save-the-earth mentality?

Life would always be a battlefield; but how his thinking had changed. Things were no longer simply black and white, right and wrong. Working for the Church was already teaching him that. It was all a muddle.

The diocese was planning to close another school, this time the only inner-city school left in Deer Crossing. He expected all hell to break loose over this one. But it was his job to see that things went smoothly.

In his short time on the job, Grimaldi watched the operators, Father John Hickey, the fiscal officer, and Brian Kelly, school superintendent, present their plans to the bishop.

“With the diminishing enrollment, lack of endowment and rising costs, especially from having to pay lay teachers, the only course of action that makes any sense, in my opinion, is to close the school and, at the end of the school year, begin a regionalization program throughout the entire diocese,” Hickey had said.

“What do you think?” the bishop asked Kelly.

“Regionalization of our current system is the only way to proceed. We would shore up our resources and redistribute them in a concerted plan based on the current

demographics of the diocese projected over five, ten, fifteen, and twenty years. That takes us well into the 21st century."

Grimaldi could have puked.

Still, he made every effort to go along and keep a lid on the school discussions, but word had gotten out to the parents and students, and they were not going to rest until they got their say.

This only made sense to him. It was instinctual, a genetic code in Americans, that people participated in major decisions affecting them. These people in the West End of town, at least ever since he could remember, were a perfect example. There was a history of broken promises from the founding of their first parish. What resulted was more bad blood and a deep-seated mistrust directed towards the chancery.

If St. Francis de Sales Catholic High School closed the suffering would be magnified by one more indiscretion in a long history of indiscretions.

At the Chronicle, and throughout Katie's ordeal, Grimaldi had learned about suffering.

He had reported on death and corruption. He had talked to people whose lives had been shattered by the unending battle in the streets. His own life had been torn apart from the time Katie contracted breast cancer and the time the beast took to kill her.

It was a beast, a beast that ate her up from the inside, sucked the life out of her. But she dealt with it, and learned to name it, face it, embrace it, even love it, all while it did its dirty work.

He was left with a gnawing sense of grief. It carried over to his work. The same time he was losing Katie and things were moving so fast he had a hard time

comprehending them. There was the case of a homeless man. Grimaldi had been investigating it against the wishes of his editor. He had the sneaking suspicion he was being stonewalled because the man was homeless and people were sick of the homeless.

He'd been tipped off about the discovery of the body by a church worker from a shelter in the South End. All that remained of the body was bones.

The fact that there were just bones wasn't difficult to handle. Bones were bones.

But there were some other peculiarities, which led the chief medical examiner to speculate that the death was part of a ritualistic killing. Even then, resources were already being stretched. Burial was easiest.

Someone let the story drop when there was no conclusive evidence. A short article appeared in the paper, drastically reduced, giving the facts, but leaving out any speculation about satanic worship. Too sensationalistic.

Since Katie's death, Grimaldi felt he had to see things through. If he could be with her until the end, he could, at least, track down the reasons the casework was suspended and the investigation was dismissed. But he had left the Chronicle for the diocesan job.

For whatever reason, people could inflict suffering on each other. He didn't necessarily believe in the personification of evil in the sense that there was an evil one, but he did believe there was evil in the world. Who knew just what was possible in the world. And this evil had to be fought.

For six months now, Saddam Hussein and his army had invaded and dug into Kuwait. Allied forces, made of a coalition from throughout the world, including the United States and the Soviet Union, settled in against him. Economic sanctions were in place.

Just who knew what was happening over there?

President Bush was calling Saddam a Hitler; Saddam was calling Bush the evil one. When things were reduced to battles in the name of religion, anything was possible, but the only sure thing was that people would die.

That was certain for his brother-in-law. He came home from Vietnam in a black bag.

The kid was out on patrol when he stepped on a mine. He went home just like 58,000 others, and he never knew what hit him.

The phone rang. Someone spoke Spanish in his ear.

“No, habla Español,” Grimaldi said.

His number at the chancery and the number for the local Spanish radio station shared six out of seven numbers.

As he hung up the phone, he thought of Katie. He'd had days before when he just needed to hear her voice.

“What's up?” he'd asked

“What's up?” she'd repeat.

What would he tell her now, tonight?

“I can't beat this thing. I'm too close to it. And these people don't understand crisis management, not one of them. Hell, what do I know about crisis management? What is crisis management?”

And she'd say something like, “Crisis management. Who can manage a crisis? Sounds like somebody decided there was going to be a crisis. The only thing that can be

managed is to introduce a crisis and watch what happens. Sounds more like comedy to me."

He laughed. It really did look like somebody had set him up, had set the parents up, the school administrators, the chancery.

"We've all been set up," he said out loud.

His voice sounded foreign. The foreign tenor was amplified by the barren office decor. He was certain the naked walls transformed his voice. On the second floor of the chancery, the office was like the other rooms without the pictures of priests and bishops from years past. He'd resisted putting up his own pictures. He was leaning towards some old prints that he and Katie picked out on their trips to Boston. Somehow they'd never got matted and framed, and he didn't think he was up to the task. Not yet.

Old prints, memories, missed opportunities, and nightmares. They haunted him just like the memory of the bones in the old factory.

He was overwhelmed with the thought that soon Katie would be reduced to bones and then dust. He walked off to the side and got sick.

"What makes people do anything?" he would ask her reaching across the boundaries of time.

But he already knew the answer; at least he knew part of it. He saw it on the job. People trying to make a life for themselves under the worst possible conditions, and settling for what they could get: no job, steal; no connections, do drugs; no self, get pregnant; overwhelmed, get an abortion; not enough profit, sell junk bonds.

It was all arcane.

And devil worship?

When he brought that up as an angle to his story, tying it to several discoveries further south along the river, his editor laughed.

“Devil worshipers,” she said. “Just some nuts dancing in the woods.”

The devil, it made them uneasy. Possession sold movies. Pop psychologists made a bundle off it. When a segment on exorcisms aired on the television program 20/20, it became a rallying cry: Does he or doesn't he exist?

Grimaldi had called over to the coroner's office for some information, anyway. He was surprised to find that even old Mickey Gagnon had cracked.

“Jack,” he said, “I've never seen anything like this.”

He paused, ever the politician.

“And this is off the record or I'll never speak to you again.”

He ended his diatribe with words Grimaldi would never forget, “If I didn't know better, I'd say the poor bastard had his heart ripped out.”

Grimaldi went out to the factory the next day to look around. His sole intention had been to try and verify what the old man had said by gathering evidence. He checked for markings, symbols, anything that might be connected to ritualistic sacrifices.

He went back to his editor the same day to explain his theory. He was told that the coroner was already too old for the job and should have retired years ago.

“He's seen more deaths than all of us put together. Maybe he's seen one too many,” she said.

A brief notice of the death was all that would appear on the obit page in the Chronicle. Unless something could be proven there was no room for sensationalism in the paper, he was reminded.

“Even if it were true, nobody would believe it,” the editor said.

Regardless, he felt obligated to pursue the case. If one homeless man could have a champion, it could make a difference.

When his thoughts started wandering, he knew it was time to go home.

“Time to go home,” he said to himself and started shuffling papers and filing them.

Before he could leave the office, Grimaldi had to sit down and file whatever was on his desk and plan the next day. He made a game of it by trying to complete both tasks within three minutes. He rarely finished in less than fifteen minutes, but he had to fool himself to get started. It was an old habit he'd picked up at the Chronicle for fear that he'd misplaced something, missed an assignment, forgotten just where he was supposed to be.

He finished his list of things to do at precisely 9:02.

He congratulated himself on a job well done.

Outside the air was crisp and clean, cold, but crisp. He inhaled. He was about to close the door to his Reliant when a single, sharp crack split the frosty night air.

[dfort001@yahoo.com](mailto:dfort001@yahoo.com)