

Chapter VI

Grimaldi stood outside classroom 203 and watched Paul Prygocki conduct the last few minutes of his class. The door was closed so Grimaldi couldn't pick up what he was talking about, but he appreciated the man's ability to hold the students' attention.

Prygocki, a solid, squared-shouldered man, once lead St. Bonnie's to three consecutive state basketball championships.

After graduation he attended Holy Cross where he was an above average player in the model of Bob Cousy. Grimaldi remembered watching him play. In fact, he had tried to follow in his footsteps.

Prygocki returned to St. Boniface's and had coached basketball and taught several different courses since then.

When he saw Grimaldi, Prygocki waved him in.

“Class, this is Mr. Grimaldi. He's a former student of mine. He's also the Chronicle reporter who broke the corruption story in Salisbury that eventually led to the savings and loan scandal. He might be able to answer some of our questions about what makes people tick.”

“Have a seat, Jack,” Prygocki said and made room on the desk by the lectern.

Grimaldi watched the students. Some were red-eyed. They seemed distracted. Class time was running down, but none seemed ready to leave.

“A little background,” Prygocki continued, “we've been talking about yesterday's shooting on the school grounds. The conversation has turned from the murder to evil in the world and, finally, to what makes people do what they do.”

“By the way,” the teacher said, “Mr. Grimaldi was the man who found Chris Brown's body.”

He felt every eye on him. Students repositioned their chairs to get a better look. Grimaldi closed his eyes.

“Lord, lord, lord,” he whispered.

When he opened his eyes, he looked into the faces of crying teen-age boys and girls, kids who'd lost a friend, kids who were questioning how anything like this could happen.

“Don't be afraid,” Prygocki said. “Go ahead and ask questions. Time is running out.”

Grimaldi looked at the teacher. Always pushing, he thought. But he could see that older man was glassy-eyed, too. Maybe he had even cried during the class. But was it his imagination or did it seem that Prygocki was really enjoying himself by putting Grimaldi on the spot?

A girl toward the front of the class raised her voice.

“Was he still alive?”

“No, by the time I reached him there was no pulse.”

“They said that Chris was dealing drugs,” she said. “I knew him. He didn't use drugs. He didn't push them. Why are they saying that? I thought newspapers were supposed to tell the truth.”

“Newspapers do the best they can, but what they do is report what other people are saying. Someone must be suspecting that the death was drug-related and the newspaper is obligated to report that. They can't stop people from speaking their minds.”

“Then why don't they talk to us to find out what he was really like?” a boy on the other side of the room yelled.

“That's a good question,” Grimaldi said. “You should ask somebody that.”

“Who?”

“Call Frank Paradis. He's on the religion beat. For some strange reason, maybe because this is a Catholic school, he'll be writing about the murder. More importantly he'll listen to you.”

“What did you see?” someone else asked.

“It was dark. I came up the sidewalk on the east side of the school, between the rectory and the cathedral. It was absolutely quiet. Except for a woman, who I suspect was a prostitute. She must have seen the body and ran over to it. She disappeared behind the rectory before I could reach her. It looked to me that she was just as surprised as I was by the body. But it didn't take her more than a second to find and go through the wallet.”

“Don't call it a body.”

This plea set off a series of moans and tears started glowing again.

As soon as he mentioned the woman, Grimaldi realize he hadn't said anything about her to the chancellor, Collins, the police, or the press.

“It's hard to believe that good triumphs over evil,” one boy said. He pulled his desk over to a girl who sat next to him. The teenager looked up at Grimaldi as the boy put his arm around the girl's shoulder.

The girl was shockingly beautiful to Grimaldi. She had piercing eyes in an oval face surrounded by long dark hair. Grimaldi thought of Katie. Prygocki assumed control of the conversation.

He'd see Katie for the first time in these hallways. She was a freshman and he was a junior. Her whole freshman year he avoided her. They hadn't talked once. She wore the same uniform, the plaid skirt and jumper, that the all the girls wore. The same white blouses, the same white socks and saddle shoes. But she was so different.

From the moment he saw her, though, he was having conversations with her, in his mind, in his heart. He was aware somehow that she stumbled through several relationships. As many seniors as freshmen wanted her attention. And despite his having led the school to a state championship that year, he still didn't feel like he could approach her.

It was in the fall of her senior year during the soccer season. He was kicking himself for having missed a goal late in a game against cross-town rival, Aquinas, going over and over the play in his mind, reenacting and preparing for the next time, because if there was one thing he had learned from sports, there was always a next time, when she appeared at the gymnasium doors and walked through them to where he sat.

“Hi,” she said.

Before they finished, they'd covered sports, boys, girls, teachers, laughter. He loved her laughter. She had a great imitation of Mr. Spunki, the chemistry teacher. From that day on, she kept him laughing, until she got sick.

Then, she made him laugh every other day at least that is what she would have said.

It was even funny now; although she was gone. The conversations with her still went on.

The class ended with a blast from the same bell that Grimaldi had responded to in a Pavlovian way when he was a student, marching at its blast from class to class.

He watched the boy with his arm around the girl and something inside him seemed to want to come apart.

The couple walked up to Prygocki. She slipped out from under the boy's arm to talk with her teacher.

Grimaldi only heard the end of the conversation.

“These things they are saying about Chris aren't true,” she told him. “People tried to take advantage of him, but he would never take advantage of them. I think and feel in my heart that this is all a mistake. Whoever it was out there was after someone else. It was a mistake, a mistake.”

Grimaldi watched as she walked over to her boyfriend and they disappeared in the crowded hallway.

Grimaldi's heart went out to her.

The world was filled with lots of mistakes, he wanted to tell her. There were shootings, muggings, sickness and war; American aid to Nicaragua, apartheid in South America, hunger and homelessness in Deer Crossing, coalition troops in the Persian Gulf.

And how did you keep track of any of them and what did it matter? he asked himself. There was history and then there was history. There was the thing historians were after; and there was the thing that was important in every life, the thing that was God and opened the heart to what was right and good, the thing that made each and every one of us unique. He called it salvation.

“Jack,” Prygocki said, and grabbed his hand, shaking it and patting him on the shoulder. “Nice to see you. But what brings you to this humble classroom?”

Grimaldi had never quite seen Prygocki so happy to see him.

There were a few things, Grimaldi explained. But he would get to them in a minute. He was more involved with the shooting on school property.

“The kids kind of got to me,” he said.

“I’ve got a few minutes before practice,” Prygocki said. “Let’s go down to the office.”

While Prygocki shuffled some papers and locked his desk, Grimaldi occupied himself.

The only other time he had been back to the school was briefly for a press conference that Prygocki had arranged. He was busy with school relations, and a few ecumenical and interfaith organizations. He had helped the state’s bishop write a policy statement on cults. It was the time when Prygocki had become a spokesperson for the state’s Conference of Christians and Jews.

The press conference had been called because a St. Boniface’s student had vandalized a synagogue.

The student’s actions had been attributed to the fact that he had lost touch with the history of the Jews. His punishment, ironically, would be to attend a program taught by an area rabbi that would help the student understand what he had done was more than tamper with a building.

The solution, facilitated by Prygocki, pleased everyone.

Prygocki grabbed his jacket, a file of some papers, and his grade book. He was about to flip the light switch when some writing on the board caught Grimaldi's eye.

``What's this?" he said, and began reading.

``When the sight of mortals is confounded and the moon eclipsed; when sun and moon are brought together -- on that day human beings will ask: `Whither shall I flee?'

``No there shall be no escape. For on that day all shall return to the Lord.

``On that day human beings shall be informed of all that they have done and all that they have failed to do. They shall become their own witnesses; their pleas shall go unheeded," he read out loud.

``Proverbs?" Grimaldi asked.

``The Koran," Prygocki answered. ``Something for the kids to think about in light of last night and in view of what's happening in the Persian Gulf."

``I don't remember you sympathizing with liberal causes," Grimaldi said.

``Never said I was," Prygocki replied. ``Some things are always worth fighting for."

Prygocki closed the door.

``How's Katie?" he asked as they clambered down the hallway.

``Katie died two years ago," Grimaldi said. ``Breast cancer."

``Sorry to hear that, Jack."

``As they say, `Life goes on.' "

``I know what you mean. I know what you mean. Melanie left me about a year and a half ago," the coach said.

The older man put his arm around the younger one.

``Aren't we two womanless beauties," he said.

``Two beauties," Jack repeated.

Except for the team photos, simply framed, and a few plaques, Prygocki's office was Spartan. The same old olive green wooden desk and beat up locker sat in the same place as Grimaldi remembered.

``You ever paint this place?" Grimaldi kidded.

``Every year," Prygocki said. ``Freshmen take care of it."

``Where do you find the same paint?"

``Must have been a good year for olive green. The school bought enough to carry me through to the next century."

``Cup of coffee?"

Prygocki handed Grimaldi a fresh cup.

``Nice and quick."

Grimaldi tasted the strong brew.

``I keep it on a timer."

Prygocki pointed to the Mr. Coffee on a bench and a timing devise. The Mr. Coffee was plugged into the timer and the timer was plugged into the wall outlet.

``I'm a creature of habit," Prygocki said, as if he were revealing the biggest secret in his life.

``When Melanie left," he added, ``I thought I was a dead man. But you're right, life does go on. They say you know when things are falling apart. I swear I never saw it coming. I still don't know till this day what happened."

A teenager dressed in practice shirt and shorts knocked at the glass door. Prygocki waved him in.

The kid grabbed a mesh net full of basketballs and dragged it out the door.

“School closings, basketball, and dead teenagers,” Prygocki said and shook his head.

“Which brings me to the reason I’m here,” Grimaldi said. “I was hoping you could help me out. Word about the school closing has gotten out and the bishop is taking a beating.”

“What did he expect?” Prygocki said.

“That’s why I need your help,” Grimaldi said. “Aside from Chris’ murder, trying to deal with all this is messy. The diocese really has to come to a stand and live with it. Making a stand doesn’t make any sense without taking into consideration what the people have to say. You’re the old man around here. You’ve been through this closing thing before and survived. Can you tell me who are the ones taking the shots and who are the ones who are willing to work with us toward some kind of mutual agreement?”

“When you’re in this thing long enough, you make a lot of friends and some enemies. These people have a long memory. This is where their home is. Even the bishop can’t say that this is his home.”

“What I mean to say is, do I have your confidence and can we get something done together?”

“It’s worth a try,” Prygocki said. “Cheers.”

He raised his cup to Grimaldi’s and they drank.

Prygocki walked to the door and yelled for a kid named Adams.

They talked for a few minutes out of earshot. The kid had to be six four, and at least 225. He towered over the coach, but it was the coach, rightly so, who dominated the conversation.

When he was through talking, Prygocki handed Adams his whistle and a stop watch that magically emerged from his jacket pocket.

``I'll be there in five minutes," Prygocki said, loud enough for Grimaldi to hear.

The kid gave his coach the thumbs up and disappeared down the hallway.

Prygocki closed the door behind him and proceeded to the changing area, a separate room with several lockers and a shower through a door directly behind his desk.

``The trouble with school closings is how they're handled," Prygocki yelled, keeping up his end of the conversation. ``The guys in the school office, who really should know better, and their buddies in the chancery, who really guide diocesan policy, come along with three, two months left in the school year and drop the ax."

Grimaldi sipped the lukewarm coffee. As he listened he looked at the pictures that lined the office wall.

``You've got a mix of people in this school," Prygocki continued. ``You've got your Italians, Hispanics, Polish, Blacks. Christ, you've got Lithuanians. Each of them has a history and they really keep to themselves."

``They are hard working, they know what sacrifice is, they want the best for their kids, and they are deathly afraid of each other. Most could give a damn about the church, but it would be unfair to characterize them as secular humanists.

“They look at the schools as a way out of a cycle of poverty. The schools are a bastion of values, where teachers can still enforce rules and stand up for their beliefs. Parents like that. It makes for a good dynamic.

“To exist, the schools have to be dynamic and creative. The big guys don't always see this, so they can't take advantage of it, tap into it. Sure it's happening with development programs and regionalization, but changing the way people think about the schools takes time and when you're simply looking at the bottom line, it's easiest to let the ax drop.”

Prygocki walked out of the changing area with his sneakers in his hand. He slipped them on at his desk and sat down to tie them.

“There are plenty of people out there who will be angry when they hear the story. It won't be long before the bishop's correspondence pile begins to grow in heaps.”

Grimaldi took the last sip of his coffee and laid the cup down.

“Give it a rinse at the sink,” Prygocki said, “and put it right up there.”

He pointed to the shelf above the Mr. Coffee.

“You know about the guy who threatened the superintendent. He's already a hero,” Prygocki said, whimsically. “But nobody knows who he is. I don't think he will do anything. The ones to watch are the quiet ones, the ones who keep to themselves, whisper in the corner, write the nasty letters and send them off without signing them. They're dangerous because they get nervous and aren't smart enough to back off when the trouble starts.”

Grimaldi slipped the cup back up on the shelf. There was a picture of a much younger Prygocki and his wife.

“We are supposed to be Christian,” Prygocki said. “But what happens is Catholic schools aren't the evangelizing instrument they used to be. They've become finishing schools. They relieve parents of their guilt for not being better Christians. At the same time, they give the kids a real jump on life; they really do, because they are sanctuaries.

“Overall, and increasingly here in the city, I find parents who send their kids to Catholic school think they're doing their job better if they leave them off at the front door everyday, or better, let little Johnny and Susie take the family beamer to school. Maybe, just maybe, some of the good stuff will wear off on him or her — by osmosis.

“To tell the truth, I don't really know what to do, but it's always better to level with these people. They've got enough money out there to buy the building and run it themselves. They've got real power.”

Grimaldi figured Prygocki's time was running short.

“If the building goes anywhere, it's going to the city, the place you're telling me that these people abhor,” he said. “If that happens, there are people out there who've threatened to fire bomb it.”

“Maybe they will, maybe they won't,” Prygocki said.

“What about the shooting?” Grimaldi asked.

“What about it?” Prygocki responded. “A kid gets in with the wrong crowd. It could happen to anyone.”

Grimaldi was looking at the pictures on the wall. He kept going back to one in particular. There was something about it that looked familiar. Prygocki was in it. He had his arm draped around a young boy. The kid might have been 12. God, Prygocki looked proud, like a father.

``So you don't think it was a mistake," Grimaldi said.

``Christ," Prygocki answered. ``Of course I think it was a mistake. All these things are mistakes. You think when this Gulf thing blows over people aren't going to see it was a mistake — taking this guy out would have been better. They'd have to be half crazy to want to starve out an entire country because some half-bit dictator forgot who he was and bit the hand that fed him."

``Of course, it's a mistake."

Prygocki was about as emotional as Grimaldi had even seen him.

``What's the story with this kid?" he asked.

``You don't recognize him," Prygocki replied.

Grimaldi took a closer look.

``Can't say I do."

``That's the kid that took the bullet. I had high hopes for him. He even lived with me while his family got straightened out. Just goes to show you it can happen to anybody."

``What would he have been doing here last night?"

``Who in hell knows," Prygocki said. ``Who in the hell knows?"

The coach stood up and pulled on his jacket with the Bonnie's emblem on it.

``Well, Jack, it was nice seeing you again. I'm sure we'll bump into each other again.

``I'm sure," Grimaldi said.

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