

Chapter IX

“I'm sure these people don't look too kindly on my being here,” Paradis said.

“They're not sure they want me here, and I work for them,” Grimaldi countered.

Grimaldi sat on the edge of his desk and tossed a tiny red dart toward a mini-dart board on a filing cabinet about ten feet away.

The dart struck close to the center of the black, green and red colored cork board — but in a triangle marked eight.

“Story of my life,” he said, and continued. “They're like my relatives when it comes to power. Someone with power they don't understand walks into a room and they suck up to them. Let that person do something wrong in my mother-in-law's eyes, and it's the end of the world.”

He tossed another dart.

“I've got a better one. They're like puppies. The press comes around here, and they wet all over the floor.”

“Go ahead,” Grimaldi said, “take a walk down that hallway toward the bishop's office. Every person, except for the receptionist, will recognize you and bend over backwards for you.”

He laughed and launched another dart. This one hit the edge of the circle.

“You should see some of these guys and their diocesan press. Don't want to give them too much space or else they might put out a newspaper worth reading. They don't understand owning a newspaper and letting it do its work is one of the best ways to help the church.”

He turned to Paradis.

“I guess I get a little carried away with some things.”

“You're down right nutty,” the younger man said. “The guys at the office said you were when you left. I thought you just sold out, but you really thought you were getting the best of both worlds. Now you're being investigated for the murder of a teenager because you don't keep regular office hours.”

“The key thing is that you've located someone that saw the bodies before anyone else did. If you don't have a shot at the Pulitzer, nobody does. More importantly, I've got a crack at reclaiming some of my faith in the world.”

Paradis laughed.

“You're not a reporter or a public relations man. You are a theologian. Faith in search of understanding is that what Aquinas said?”

“Someone like that.”

Paradis had a real social sensibility. For the last couple of years, he'd been part of a group feeding the homeless in a basement of St. Thomas the Apostle Church downtown.

Now he was bringing back information about two regulars that might have come across the factory death. One was a Bible thumping fundamentalist who survived Vietnam. He couldn't stop talking about the end of the world. The other was a ratty, little guy with a club foot.

“No qualms about going undercover as a cook,” Paradis joked.

“I've done my share of charity work,” Grimaldi said, feeling just a little bit guilty.

``Come on, Jack, lighten up. These people aren't going to know you're stirring the pasta."''

They made arrangements to meet at the church at 5 p.m.

``You're not going to believe this. This time of year the people start lining up at the door about that time, even though they can't get in until 8 o'clock. Dinner is at 8:15 sharp, barring anything extracurricular activity, fist fights, knifings, and heart attacks."''

It surprised Grimaldi that there were no tables. The people, mostly men, lined up in the church hall, grabbed a tray, and were served. After they got their food they rummaged around for a chair up against the wall.

The food was doled out. No one was allowed to take a portion, not even choose an apple or orange. A person in Paradis' group had to hand it out.

After preparing the pasta and browning some hamburger, Grimaldi found himself mixing up aluminum foil tins of goulash and shoving them in the oven to heat. Once the food was heated and put out, he was called out to the serving line.

He handed out cartons of milk and tried to make eye contact with the people going by. The flurry of activity ended quickly. After everyone had been served, a bowl of hard candy was placed on the serving tables along with the left over fruit, milk, and goulash. Anyone who wanted seconds was free to take them.

Paradis called Grimaldi over while they were removing the empty serving bowls and collecting trays.

``After we get done with this load, let's go sit down with the two guys over by the exit sign," Paradis said.

The two each pulled up a chair as the long-haired guy and his club footed-friend finished mopping up their goulash with bread.

``Howdy," Paradis said. He explained who he was and introduced Grimaldi.

``He works for the church," Paradis said.

``You a priest," the long-haired one said.

Grimaldi shook his head, no.

``Goddamn it," the homeless man said. ``You are."

He looked at his buddy.

``Never a priest around when you need one."

He looked at Grimaldi.

``You sure you're not a priest?"

Grimaldi said no.

``I've seen you here before," the long-haired one said to Paradis.

``I'm here three times a month," Paradis said.

``See," the man said to his friend, ``I recognized this one."

``You read the Bible?" he asked Paradis.

``Sure," Paradis said.

``All of it?"

``The whole thing."

``This is the end time," the man said, impressed. ``There are signs everywhere, in the newspapers, over the radio. Look around you."

``The horsemen have been released and are doing their work now."

He fingered an orange. The short man looked a little embarrassed but managed to say, "He's right. Look around you."

Grimaldi didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Even if these two remembered anything, how were they going to share it?

"Robin, here, was in Vietnam," the short man said. "He's seen a lot. But you never saw a better friend or a harder worker, if you know what I mean."

"Sure," Grimaldi said. "I was there for the TET offensive."

"You know, then," Robin said. "What more needs to be said."

He popped the orange into his pocket.

"There was a time when people meant something. No more. People live in the streets. They eat out of garbage cans. They sleep in cardboard boxes under bridges," Robin said.

"Nothing like a nice dry bush," the short man said. He laughed.

He realized his mistake.

"You a believer?" he asked Paradis.

Without waiting for an answer, he pointed to Robin and jabbed a thumb into his own chest.

"We believe," he said.

"I'm a believer," Paradis said.

"You?" the short man asked Grimaldi.

"I believe," he answered.

Robin spoke.

"Do you believe the risen Christ is here?" he asked and pointed to his heart.

``I do," Grimaldi said.

``How do you pray?" he asked.

Grimaldi recited the Lord's Prayer.

Robin offered Grimaldi an apple.

``Take it," he said. ``I wouldn't give you poison."

``You might need it," Grimaldi said.

``I get what I need," Robin said. ``God provides."

The short man disappeared and returned with a coffee.

``Robin was in Vietnam," he said.

Robin nodded.

``He's been waiting for General Swartzkopf to arrange to airlift him out of here over to the Persian Gulf. Drop right down on Deer River and scoop him up. He's the right guy to finish it off."

Robin nodded.

``He's has been around. That's why he prefers being called Long Hair. People will remember him that way."

``I don't want people to remember me for myself," Robin said. ``I want them to remember me as a sign. It's painful to remember a homeless, long-haired man. But suffering is not bad, not if it helps you discover who you are and how you can serve the Kingdom."

``We're here to serve the Kingdom," Grimaldi said. ``How's your memory?"

``I have an excellent memory," the short man said.

Robin nodded.

``I have a good memory, a memory for suffering. I've seen and felt things you don't want to see and feel."

``But there is something we'd like to know. Do you remember the factory down by Cedar Landing?"

He nodded, yes.

``There was a body down there and we'd like to know what you remember about it."

``A vision from hell," Robin said and crossed himself.

``What do you mean?" Paradis asked.

``There was a body in the middle of the floor. By the time we got there, the candles had gone out and the devil had finished his work. After seeing it, I wanted to take my eyes out. It was a curse on the world."

Robin ran his fingers through his long hair.

``We pray for the man," the short one said. ``I tell him," he patted Robin on the back, ``there was nothing to be done."

dfort001@yahoo.com