

14.

Café Torino was a watering hole for the young and rich, the old and rich and everyone else as long as they could pay the premium markup that went onto the bill.

Still, as all those who had been there knew, Torino *delivered*. It offered outstanding cuisine, ambience to the eyebrows, and waiters who were the best that Hollywood's acting studios could provide, all of them assiduously working on their next audition even as their day jobs required them to serve food and drink to the luminaries of the entertainment industry.

A suavely dark and well-dressed Augusto – no one knew his last name – oversaw the reservations hostess, another would-be actor, politely greeted Torino's regular clientele as they entered, and carefully assessed where everyone should be placed, whether they wanted visibility, or discretion, or just needed to be put somewhere out of the way. Once in the main dining room guests would either be seated or asked to stop at the bar, which generally had evening diners two-deep waiting for a desired table to be cleared. Special clients, those who merited Torino's most careful attention, would be taken immediately to an open table or ushered to one of the restaurant's private rooms on the second floor.

It was all part of the brilliant design of Franco Baldissaro, Torino's owner, who had established the model for his most successful restaurant in Washington before taking it to Beverly Hills. Baldissaro's showmanship was much a part of the entertainment business as the clients he served.

When Marten Pryce said he was there as Ephraim Grimaldi's guest, Augusto snapped his fingers at a hovering assistant and issued a few quiet instructions. The assistant took Pryce's coat and motioned the director to follow him up the stairs to the first small dining room at the top.

The older man was already seated.

“Marten, come enjoy the oysters.”

Grimaldi loved seafood; he had already downed half a dozen bluepoints, flown in from the east coast where they bred more easily than in the cold waters of the Pacific.

“A drink, Marten? A nice wine?”

The director saw a bottle of nice Sonoma fume blanc on the table but decided Pellegrino would be enough. This was a business discussion, not a social event. He could have a glass of wine later, at home, if he still wanted one.

They ordered and when their waiter had left the room, Grimaldi leaned over the table.

“So, Marten, what’s this about? Why the urgent meeting?”

“The Athena. And Jason Connor.”

Grimaldi knew Jason well enough. He still remembered the day when Jason had interviewed *him* about the antiquities job, not the reverse – and then gone on to tell him what his vision for the museum should be!

“What’s the problem?”

“Jason’s got a bug about the statue. He just won’t give up the background investigation.”

“What does he want?”

A perplexed look came across the director’s face.

“Frankly, Ephraim, I don’t know. You’ve heard the stories of his earlier work in the government. State Department? CIA? Who knows? Whoever he worked for, he now seems to see something suspicious underneath every chair. He can’t let go of the provenance issue. He says – says – there may be a problem.”

Grimaldi’s eyes steadied on the museum director.

“Is there a problem?”

“None that I can see, Ephraim. Not one. I’ve been involved with the Athena for the past four months, since Maybank showed it to me in London, and I should know. But Jason’s dug his feet in. He wants the museum to drop it, I think, just not buy it, and he seems to be using the background issue as a cover to resist.”

“Why would he do that?”

“It’s impossible to know, but he appears to want the statue to be seen as a huge

mistake, something that the museum shouldn't buy. He even suggested the idea of a set-up. Then there's the other thing –“

The older man held up his hand and gave his full attention to Pryce.

“Stop, Marten! Set-up? What does he mean by a set-up?”

“He thinks someone's out to get the museum, and that they're using the Athena to do so. A stalking horse that will blacken our reputation.”

Pryce was on delicate ground. He wanted Grimaldi concerned but not alarmed.

“What? Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

“Never. Ridiculously high asking prices, sure. Fakery, certainly. But deliberately trying to bring disrepute to a museum? With a great work of art? It's absurd, Ephraim. I told him as much when he suggested it.”

Pryce paused for a moment, then went on, quietly, his voice lowed slightly.

“But it's not inconsistent with his background, you know.”

Grimaldi had half-finished the turbot he had ordered, but he put down his fork and knife and peered at the director with unblinking blue eyes.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Angleton.” Pryce said the name in a barely audible voice, almost a whisper. In the long minute that followed he took another bite of salmon.

“Angleton?”

Grimaldi looked blank for a minute, but the director could see a bell ring somewhere in the back of the old man's mind. He let the moment hang, buttered a piece of bread and took a drink of Pellegrino.

“James Jesus Angleton. Head of the CIA's counterintelligence staff. One of the brightest people they had – but someone who had been made an utter fool of by the Soviets, who had established a massive spy ring that penetrated the intelligence services of both Britain and the United States. Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald McLean. You must have heard of Philby.”

“Yes.” Grimaldi had now also lowered his voice.

“Angleton never forgave himself, and never forgot. He went on a relentless hunt for moles – foreign agents – lurking inside the CIA. He became obsessed with the idea that the Agency had been penetrated. He went on a witch hunt that destroyed the careers

of a lot of people, and almost destroyed the organization. He died in the late eighties, but his influence – and paranoia – lasted for years.”

Grimaldi had stopped eating entirely. He carefully put his fork down and placed his hands to either side of his dish.

“What’s that to do with Jason?”

“Ephraim, he said ‘set-up’. If he was in the CIA in fact, he may really think that someone is out to get into – and get at – the museum. Using the Athena. I mean, that’s just preposterous, but he may really believe it.”

The older man fell silent, lost in thought for a moment. He seemed to have grown smaller in his chair. Finally he looked up at Pryce.

“And what’s the other thing?”

“Ephraim, it’s no secret that Jason has his sights on my job. Not now or next year, but at some time in the future. But if I can be seen to fail or make some egregious mistake sooner, that wouldn’t bother him a bit.”

Grimaldi looked around the small dining room. The waiters had gone and there was no one, other than Marten Pryce, to hear his next words.

“And you’re absolutely sure the Athena is no mistake?”

“None. It’s as good as you can get. It will be the centerpiece for the museum, the first great work of art people will see when they walk in. There’s nothing like it, anywhere. Every other Athena, in every museum or private collection, will pale by comparison, Ephraim. We mustn’t lose it.”

Marten Pryce had worked assiduously – and successfully, he thought – to gain Ephraim Grimaldi’s trust during the four years since he had assumed charge of the museum. It had taken him a long time to learn how to edge the older man toward a conclusion. Don’t lead the man, he knew – plant the seed, water it, then let him do his own cultivation.

He watched as Grimaldi considered what he had said.

“It will become a monument Ephraim. If we get it, it will take the name of the museum, itself. Imagine – the Grimaldi Athena.”

The Grimaldi Athena. Pryce could see something move behind the old man’s eyes.

“Jason. You’re really saying he’s been blinded by his own ambition? I always thought he was pretty straight.”

“Ephraim, he either sees a conspiracy about the statue that makes no sense – or he wants to cause a failure that he can lay at my door. Either way, the museum will lose the Athena.”

Jason Connor? Or the Grimaldi Athena? Pryce could see the old man’s mind turning over. The choice was stark, and unavoidable. Grimaldi would have to go against Marten, his trusted director, keep Jason Connor, and lose the statue – or dismiss the curator and have the stunning and colossal statue in the museum.

Grimaldi slowly swirled the wine in his glass. Pryce sensed he had reached a decision.

“Can we fire him? With no noise?” Grimaldi detested public exposure.

“I wish there were some other way, but we’ll have to. And, no, I don’t think there’ll be any noise. He’d want to leave quietly. Everything about him – his background, his entire pattern of behavior – says he’d never go public about leaving, although I’d want to find a reason to hang it on. Also, he signed a non-disclosure agreement when he came to the museum, and that should keep him still. Our friends at the Getty have been doing that for years. Successfully. Do you remember the curator they hung out to dry a few years ago? She didn’t make a peep.”

“What happened?”

“The Italians charged her with conspiracy to loot antiquities from Italy – you’ll remember the event. They put her on trial in Rome. The Getty paid for her legal costs – and must have asked for her silence in return. She didn’t say a thing, just stood there and took it. Even though they say – and Ephraim, I don’t know this as fact – they say that the museum director and board approved every single thing she did.

Pryce looked straight at the old man.

“And not one of them needed to step forward to take responsibility. And none did.”

Grimaldi took another drink of his Riesling.

“Money – would paying him money help? We could keep him on salary for a

year or so to keep him quiet.”

Money was Grimaldi’s solution for a lot of problems. It generally worked. He had fired people in the past, people with a lot of potentially damaging inside information, and had made certain they did not talk by making it worth their while not to utter a word.

“Money wouldn’t work. Jason doesn’t need it. He’d know we wanted to buy his silence. We’d be waving a red flag in front of a bull. No, Ephraim, standard severance pay is enough. Make it appear normal.”

The older man thought for a moment, and swallowed the last of his turbot.

“All right. Get rid of him if you really think we have to. But Marten, make the problem go away. I do *not* want a problem from the museum.

“*Make it go away,*” he repeated. His voice was higher pitched now, almost querulous.

He stood up and reached for his cane. The conversation was over. The two men collected their coats and went out into the now-fresh evening air.

Walter Jackson opened the rear door of the waiting Mercedes. Grimaldi stood still beside the car for a moment, then turned back to look at the director.

“Marten, I want you to know how grateful I am for this talk. Really. There are so many people who want to take advantage of me.”

In that moment Ephraim Grimaldi seemed to have grown older and very much more tired than Pryce had ever seen him.

Jackson handed the older man inside the car, started the engine and drove into the night. Pryce gave his ticket stub to the restaurant valet and watched the departing car until it turned and disappeared around a far corner. His breath condensed into a small cloud, and he pulled his coat more tightly around his shoulders.

Not bad, he thought. Not bad at all. Better than I thought.