

## 23. Heaven Has Lost Its Patience

“Jones took a plane to Boston, to see Cardinal Peter Donnelly,” General Craig Lawrence Ratwell, Commander of the Overland Security Administration, told Lieutenant Hugh Lawrence Briggs, a young but unusually gifted operative, whom Ratwell had summoned to join Operation Dove, the code name being used for the entire anti-Donnelly operation. “Then he dropped out of sight. His disappearance is critical, because, as you know, he’s the point man for our entire operation. Without him, strategic progress on Operation Dove has almost come to a standstill.”

“So, you want me to find him,” said Briggs. “Is that it?”

“I want to you muck around in the area where Jones last encountered enemy activity,” answered Ratwell. “That means Avignon.”

“But wouldn’t it make more sense for me to go to Boston,” Briggs put in, “and try to pick up Jones’ trail?”

“I don’t think so,” said Ratwell. “We’re assuming he got in to see Donnelly—Jones, that competent bastard, usually accomplishes his purposes! However, our sources tell us that Donnelly’s taken off for Italy. And, because Jones vanished at the same time that Donnelly left, we think that, unless Jones is already dead, there’s a good possibility they’re together. Anyway, our operatives in Rome are searching for him now. So that doesn’t have to concern you.

“What we want you to do,” Ratwell continued, “is to get additional intelligence from the only area where we’re sure that Donnelly has an active organization. You’ve been briefed about the Dubonnette house and Greta Dubonnette, whom we’re reasonably certain is Donnelly’s agent. You were also told about Father Felix Rudolf, a local administrator of the Catholic school board and friend of our operation, who’s been partly taken into our confidence. Before he left Virginia with Suzanne Sebonne, Major Jones shared his suspicions with me that Avignon was an

important center of activity for Donnelly. Oh, and by the way,” Ratwell added, “remember that Jones suspects that Juliette Dubonnette, the Dubonnette’s sixteen year old daughter, has somehow been targeted by Donnelly’s group, although he has no idea what they have in mind for her.”

“Yes,” acknowledged Briggs, “that was all in the report you gave me. I guess you want me to leave right away. Am I going alone?”

“No one works alone on Operation Dove, any longer!” thundered Ratwell, pounding his fist on the table. “Two of my best operatives have already gone missing. Lieutenant Ginger Bliss will be your partner—I know you worked with her before in Central America. I already briefed her earlier today. And I’m sending ten operatives along to guard your back.”

“Ten operatives!” exclaimed Briggs. “You must be expecting a war!”

“Expecting a war?” answered Ratwell. “Don’t kid yourself. This is a war! And the genetic weapons of mass destruction that will be used, on us, if we don’t do something to stop it soon, will make chemical weapons and germ warfare seem like a picnic!”

“Yes, sir,” Briggs responded, quietly, rising from his seat. “I’ll get my gear ready and report to the airstrip at once.”

“Good luck, Lieutenant,” said Ratwell, standing and shaking Briggs’ hand. “You have our full confidence—you’re the best man for the job, or I wouldn’t have picked you—and our full support. Anything you need, anything—short of an atomic bomb, and we can even talk about that!—is a phone call away.”

Brandon Schmidt, Hermann Lingarn’s comrade in arms, having concluded his mission in New York with the kidnapping of Suzanne, had been dispatched to Avignon on a highly sensitive mission by Donnelly, and his arrival, as it happened, was almost simultaneous with that

of Briggs, Bliss, and their team. Schmidt had been ordered to drive to a remote, abandoned airstrip some thirty miles from the city, where he was to take top secret cargo into his custody for immediate transportation to the United States. For the small town of Avignon, these arrivals constituted more Christmas time activity that it had experienced in many decades. There was, in fact, more activity in Avignon than had gone on since the end of the Avignon Papal Schism, which terminated in 1459.

Meanwhile, Jones had no complaints about Donnelly's accommodations for his ten guests in Rome. The Cardinal had taken four adjoining suites in the Grand Hotel Plaza, one of the oldest and most prestigious hotels in the city. It was situated in the heart of the historical center, on the exclusive Via del Corso, the street identified with Rome's elegance and glamour. Around the corner was Trinita' dei Monti, known to the English speaking world as "the Spanish Steps," where the most exclusive shops were clustered, and yards from Via Condotti, the deluxe shopping avenue. Close by were many of the city's ancient monuments, medieval and Renaissance churches and other historical places of interest. The hotel's luxurious apartments offered terraces with spectacular views of the city center, and the building boasted an Italian garden, with fountains and ornaments, and stylish bars and restaurants and combined traditional, refined opulence with the latest electronic amenities to facilitate communication and entertainment.

Jones wasn't as happy with the arrangements that had been made for him personally, however. His suite, which incorporated two bedrooms, a living room, a small combination dining area and sitting room, and a kitchenette, was being shared with Rolfe and Hugo, two of Donnelly's bodyguards, who had, evidently, been assigned to keep an eye on him. The first thing Jones did when he found himself alone in his bedroom was to check the telephone. He

wasn't surprised to find that, even though he heard a dial tone, and, presumably, could receive telephone calls, direct dial outgoing calls had been disabled. Jones was so confident that a request to place a call through the switchboard would be politely but firmly declined that he hung up without bothering to try.

Donnelly's suite, similar to his, but with three bedrooms, a large sitting room, a modest dining room, and a full kitchen, was next door, and Donnelly's remaining two bodyguards, Richard and Ira, moved into the smallest of the bedrooms it contained. On the other side of Donnelly's suite was one remaining suite. It was shared by Deacon John Corsair and Elton Stanmore.

They made a tidy, little crew, the ten of them, Jones mused. He found himself itching to get moving and discover what this expedition was all about.

Jones heard a knock on his bedroom door.

"Come in," Jones said.

Donnelly opened Jones's door and walked in, leaving the door open behind him.

"I hope you're finding the appointments satisfactory," said Donnelly, looking around the room. "However, you do have some catching up to do! We left in such a hurry that, obviously, you weren't able to bring anything with you—anything at all! I'll send my shoppers to get you some clothes. That'll save time and effort. They'll bring you a wrack of things. You can keep what you like. They'll also pick up some toiletries and other small things you'll probably want. Anything you don't find, after we get back, just ask, and they'll get it."

"After we get back?" echoed Jones. "Are we going somewhere?"

“I knew you’d be eager to get moving,” answered Donnelly. “So I thought you and I would visit one of my favorite sections of the city, the district of Trastevere. Care to get started?”

Right again, thought Jones, I am eager to find out what you’re doing! So Jones stood and followed as Donnelly turned and left the room.

It was late afternoon when Donnelly and Jones left the limousine on a main street begun walking together, trailed inconspicuously and at some distance by Richard and Ira. A few blocks away, Donnelly lead Jones down constricted, meandering streets, scarcely wide enough for a single car to pass, lined with broken, ill-tended pavements so narrow that the two of them could not bestride them abreast, so that Jones either went behind Donnelly or walked in the cobbled road beside him. On either side of the street, crumbling rows of dingy five and six storey buildings, with huge old wooden doors and sometimes with enormous iron gates, rose up to close off all but a slim bar of the sky. It was December, and a chill was in the air; but the passages were populated with pedestrian and vehicular, primarily scooter, traffic, and, as Donnelly and Jones made their way, it was all but impossible for them to converse, owing to the noises that filled the air from every quarter.

Donnelly lead Jones around a corner, and they entered Pasolini’s, a small, beat up coffee shop, which had a window facing the street, covered by a red and white awning, its name emblazoned on a cheerful red and white sign hanging over the door. Richard and Ira waited outside.

As they took their seats, Jones surveyed the run down eatery. Two scruffy boys in T-shirts and thin leather jackets, one of whom had dyed black hair that was teased into spikes, hovered in front of a small video poker machine by the side of the room. He couldn’t tell if they

were trying to decide if they should play, or whether they had already lost their money and were eking out the last dregs of distraction, which was better than absolute boredom, that could be absorbed by recapitulating their defeat. A chubby young girl, in a bulky loose knit, pink sweater, with close-cropped, streaked blonde hair, a button nose, and a pretty face, somewhat marred by heavy blue eye makeup and mauve lipstick, her appearance cluttered with cheap costume jewelry, sat at a nearby table, staring into space. Jones surmised that she was in the company of the two boys. On the other side of the room, a short, elderly man, wearing an oversized, heavily worn, dark cloth coat, hunched over a cup of espresso and a plate that held the remaining half of a thin Italian sandwich. There were cigarette butts, bits of paper, crumpled paper cups, and plastic utensils scattered on the floor, and the paint on the walls was dirty and, in some spots, peeling.

“I’m surprised that this is one your favorite areas of Rome,” Jones said, raising his tiny featureless white china cup, filled with thick, steaming espresso, to his lips. “Trastevere doesn’t seem to offer ancient ruins or modern luxuries. In fact, it looks like a slum.”

“It looks like a slum,” acknowledged Donnelly, as Jones ceased his examination of the establishment and looked back at him, “because it is a slum. And it’s been around for a long time. There’s been a small colony here, on the west bank on the Tiber, since the foundation of Rome. In ancient times, it was reachable from the main city only by slogging across a ford; but, as you saw when we came over, today, the Ponte Palatino crosses the wetlands from Piazza Bocca della Verità.

“After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century,” Donnelly continued his history lesson, “Trastevere was gradually colonized by Syrian and Jewish trading communities. In the early Middle Ages, the Jews were removed across the Tiber, to the Ghetto, and, over the

centuries, Trastevere became the main working-class district of the Pope's capital." Donnelly paused, turned to the window, next to which they were sitting, and gestured with his hand at the scene in the street, continuing, "But Italy is a poor country. 'Working class,' here, is really a euphemism for 'poor.'

"But the area isn't a total loss, from the standpoint of a visitor," Donnelly added, turning back to look at Jones again, "Trastevere has a few colorful taverns and neighborhood alimentari and latterie. It also has some squares and minor ancient and medieval monuments, which are often pleasantly deserted, especially at night. But Trastevere's main interest," Donnelly concluded, "is its people."

Donnelly proceeded to recount to Jones tales of the common people of the city of Rome, from the founding of the city, nearly a thousand years before Christ, until the present day.

"Fires became the scourge of the Imperial capital," Donnelly told him. "They started in the crowded slums and repeatedly wiped out entire sections of the city. Thousands of people were killed, every time a conflagration occurred. Nero's famous fiddling while Rome burned is just one example of such a disaster. But the Emperor and the Senators and other aristocrats weren't particularly disturbed by these infernos. The members of the upper classes rarely had occasion to visit the poorer areas. That's why nothing was ever done—until recently, at least—to make the city safe for its indigent inhabitants."

Donnelly signaled to the proprietor, a short, fat, balding man, his remaining shock of greasy, brown hair in disarray, who stood behind the counter in a soiled white smock, bending over and reading a newspaper. The man looked up and waddled over to their table.

Jones could understand Italian tolerably well, but he couldn't speak it. This incapacity rankled him, because it would impair his efforts if he had an opportunity to break away from

Donnelly and make any independent moves while in Rome. Jones listened as Donnelly inquired after a man named “Luigi Rasgoni,” asking if Rasgoni was at home. The proprietor told him that he was.

Rasgoni was disabled, unable to walk, except painfully and awkwardly, with the use of two canes. He had been injured in an industrial accident fifteen years before. He lived with his wife, their five children, and his mother, on the fifth floor of a four room tenement apartment, around the corner from Pasolini’s.

As Donnelly and Jones entered Rasgoni’s apartment, which Jones found smelled of mold and the kitchen, Jones was struck by the number and variety of Christian icons that virtually covered the walls and that stood or were propped up on the furniture in every corner of the room. Most prominent was a life-sized oil painting of Jesus, hanging in a chipped, gaudy, gilded frame over a distressed sofa that was pushed against the wall opposite the doorway, delivering the sermon on the mount to an assembled crowd. It was an egregious creation, Jones thought, depicting Christ as an androgynous, longhaired beauty, with fair, smooth skin and luminous, cow-like eyes, a nimbus glowing around his head, raising soft, perfect hands in a gesture of blessing, hope, and forgiveness.

So, Jones realized, I’ve been brought to meet a struggling, devout Italian family.

And meet them, he did, except for Maria, Rasgoni’s wife, who was away in the city, where she worked as a clerk in a women’s shoe salon. Lucia Rasgoni, Rasgoni’s mother, a rotund woman with a gray bun, wearing a flowered housedress, who tended the children in Maria’s absence, was busy setting out a snack for the two boys and a girl who had just returned from their school day. Two little blonde girls, still toddlers, were playing with a collection of cheap toys in the corner. A question that cried out to be answered, thought Jones, was why, in

face of their poverty and the husband's disability, they had chosen to have so many children? But, of course, looking at the religious artifacts all around him, Jones knew the reason: Birth control was against the teachings of the Catholic Church.

After introducing Jones as his friend and traveling companion, Donnelly extended an offer to say some prayers for the Rasgoni household, an offer that was seriously and eagerly accepted by Rasgoni, who called out to his mother to keep the children quiet. Then, Donnelly stood and intoned a series of prayers in Latin and Italian, appealing to God to bless the house, Rasgoni, his wife, his mother, and, especially, the children.

"Thank you, Your Eminence," said Rasgoni, in Italian, when Donnelly was finished, crossing himself. "Would you...?" He held out his hand, imploringly, toward Donnelly. Although Jones didn't understand what Rasgoni was asking, Donnelly did, and he walked toward Rasgoni's chair and extended his right hand before the seated man, who took his hand in both of his hands, drew it to his mouth, and kissed his ring.

"Horrible, isn't it?" said Donnelly, as he and Jones exited the high, arching stone doorway of the old building, stepping onto the broken pavement outside. "Rasgoni's mother is sick. When her health fails, I don't know how they'll be able to manage. And, you know, Maria's pregnant again!"

"Whose fault is that?" asked Jones. "They won't go against the Church. And God, in His wisdom, has refused to allow his followers the use of birth control!"

"You think that, do you?" asked Donnelly. "Where, in the Testaments, do you read a prohibition against birth control?"

“As you know very well,” said Jones, sharply, “it’s the Papal reading of the injunction in Genesis, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ The last three Popes have consistently affirmed that the use of birth control is a mortal sin.”

“Yes, the senile, addled Popes!” agreed Donnelly, his eyes on fire, “They have indeed been guilty of this insanity and much insanity beside! Did it ever occur to you that, if a sane man were Pope, a man to whom God had given the gifts of intellect and reason, not to mention a man who is, on some occasions, actually inspired and guided by God, the Church might enter a new era of prosperity and joy?”

“A man like you, for example?” Jones snapped.

“There are no men like me,” answered Donnelly. “But come along. It’s getting dark. I want to take you to another of my favorite spots. Let’s find the car.”

The Vatican Plaza on a cold, clear evening was a stunningly magnificent sight. The Basilica of St. Peter, the dome of the largest cathedral on Earth, Michelangelo’s design, rose majestically in the distance, flanked on either side by floodlit rows of immense marble columns, topped by gorgeous winged sculptures from the High Renaissance. The impression of grandness and wealth and sovereign authority was overwhelming.

Donnelly and Jones stood together on the plaza, at first in silence, observing the splendor before them.

“In that building,” Donnelly told Jones, referencing St. Peter’s, “lives an old man, with half a mind. More people owe allegiance to him than to any other man in the world. He controls more wealth than any other man in the world. And, even though he’s often scarcely sure what day it is, he’s the only man anointed to speak with the authority of Christ.”

“Well,” answered Jones, “no one lives forever. As you say, he’s an old man. And the College of Cardinals will be picking his successor when he dies.”

“Yes, when he dies!” responded Donnelly. “With the wonders of modern medicine, he could live for a decade, or more. But that’s hardly the point. His successor will be just like him: An old, weak man, whose only talents are compromising his principles and appearing pious. That’s the kind of man the Cardinals want to be Pope! Each of the Cardinals has his own little kingdom—they have the entire world divided up!—and they don’t want anyone in Rome to spoil their arrangements.”

“You make the Church sound thoroughly corrupt,” said Jones. “If that’s the way you see it, why would you give your life to it?”

“There’s nothing so corrupt,” Donnelly answered, “that the blood of Christ cannot wash it clean. Heaven has lost its patience with the Earth. The time is about to expire when God will suffer His Church to be run by fools and protectors of petty fiefdoms!”

“That sounds pretty definite,” said Jones. “Would you care to give me a date? An expiration date?”

But Donnelly pulled up the collar on his coat against the rising winds, turned away, toward St. Peter’s, without answering, and looked at the basilica intensely, almost as if, Jones thought, he imagined he were receiving a message from the towering, cross-capped dome. Or perhaps, Jones considered, he was visualizing himself, as Jones now visualized him, standing on the high portico on a sunlight day, wearing the white satin cap and robes of the Papacy, raising his arms to bless a hundred thousand devoted followers, packing the plaza below and spilling onto the surrounding broad avenues.

So, Donnelly believed he had been sent to reform the Catholic Church? Donnelly intended to root out corruption and, Jones gathered, remembering their visit to Rasgoni, to make some distribution of the fabulous wealth the Church was hoarding. And, despite his obvious reactionary tendencies, he also intended to institute sweeping doctrinal innovations, for example, permitting birth control. As to what other changes Donnelly had in mind for the Church and for the world—for Donnelly clearly had the “great globe itself,” Jones remembered Shakespeare’s phrase, in his sights—Jones could only wonder. Looking at the strong-willed, deranged, and impassioned man who stood entranced before him, he reflected on the years of planning and the awesome resources that were being marshaled in support of Donnelly’s coup d’etat. For that was what Donnelly was plotting, Jones was convinced: The overthrow of the leadership of the Vatican, a sovereign that had the allegiance of over a billion souls, and a scheme to somehow thrust that state into the forefront of world power politics.

But the most unpleasant thing Jones had divined from his day with the Cardinal was that Donnelly was not only a likeable man, he was a charismatic leader, in the root sense of that word, meaning, that he had the “divine gift” to rule, and he was capable of winning the devoted loyalty of the many. And it seemed more urgent than ever to stop him, Jones reflected somberly, calling to mind again Roger Bacon’s warning about the abuse of life extension by despots, before Donnelly had any chance of assuming the mantle of that awesome power—perhaps forever!