

10. Seal Our Bargain with a Kiss

Mrs. Dubonnette handed Jones a bottle of Bordeaux, as the parting gift she had promised, and gathered the visitors together for a souvenir snapshot. After the visitors had taken their leave, Suzanne drove Jones and Father Rudolf back through the windy, hilly, tree sheltered lanes, toward the city.

“You were certainly right about the seditious strain that shoots through this region,” said Jones, who was sitting in the front seat, next to Suzanne, to Father Rudolf, who was sitting diagonally across from him in the back.

“Yes,” agreed Father Rudolf, who decided to put his language training to use and speak English during this conversation. “Dubonnette is a pious man, in a way, but one with a rebellious streak a yard wide. Clearly, he’s—how do you say?—‘the man to watch,’ if you’re trying to identify a contact with a subversive group that—uh—means no good to the Holy Father!”

There was momentary silence in the conversation, as the wind whistled past, and the car continued touring, rolling up and down the rising and falling contours of the tiny roadway.

“What do you say, Suzanne?” said Jones. “Would you agree with Father Rudolf’s assessment?”

“Father, with all respect, I think you’re mistaken,” Suzanne answered, keeping her eyes fixed on the road ahead. “Dubonnette is an old fashioned provincial, a bit of a drunk, and a cantankerous amateur theologian. When he sobers up, I think he’ll be a little abashed over having made such a fuss about the Latin Mass. But, maybe, he’ll be proud, as well, for having engaged a real Bishop in a theological colloquy!” Suzanne paused. “No,” she continued, “it’s Mrs. Dubonnette we have to watch. She’s the contact we’ve been trying to identify.”

“Excellent!” said Jones. “And would you care to elaborate, for the edification of Father Rudolf, as to how you reached this conclusion?”

“Mrs. Dubonnette?” put in Father Rudolf. “She hardly said two words all night! She certainly contributed nothing on the subject of Catholic traditions or the Church. Why on Earth would you suspect her of any involvement?”

“Partly because of her silence on the subject,” explained Suzanne. “But she was more than silent. She tried hard to silence Dubonnette and to change the subject whenever he strayed onto one of two topics: Catholic dogma and the visit of Mr. O’Malley.”

“Mon Dieu,” expostulated Father Rudolf, “you’re right!”

“Exactly,” Jones put in. “Mrs. Dubonnette tried valiantly to steer the conversation away from both of those matters. You could understand why she might, in all innocence, have wished to avoid a theological debate with a dinner guest. But I saw her face when O’Malley was mentioned: She turned white. She never expected O’Malley’s name would come up at all; and, once he was named, she tried desperately changing the subject!”

“So, we discovered that ‘Touneur’ is really ‘O’Malley,’ and that he comes from Los Angeles,” said Suzanne. “And, obviously, he has ties with the Church there.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Jones. “that turns out not to be true; that is, the part about him coming from Los Angeles.”

“I gather, then,” said Suzanne, “that Juliette must have had something interesting to tell you?”

“Indeed, she did!” replied Jones. “She and O’Malley were carrying on a clandestine romance. Nothing torrid, you understand. Just puppy love, really. O’Malley emerges as a rather upright, moralistic young fellow, genuinely committed to the values of the Church. And Juliette

is as innocent as a girl at first communion. But, you remember what the old shopkeeper said about O'Malley? How dashing he was? Well, he was also likeable and full of vitality and the first outsider Juliette had ever been thrown into contact with during her entire young life. Anyway, they began sneaking around, spending time together when her mother and uncle were away from the house or asleep."

"Go on," prompted Suzanne. "Please, go on!"

"O'Malley isn't actually engaged to Mrs. Dubonnette's cousin," Jones continued. "I'm not even sure she has a cousin. That was a story invented so he could secure an invitation to stay at the Dubonnette house."

"You mean he told Juliette he wasn't engaged!" put in Suzanne. "Really, Your Grace, how can you be so naïve as to believe a line like that?"

"I do believe it," replied Jones. "As I said, O'Malley is an honest man, or so I think. Because he cared for Juliette, he felt he had to tell her the truth—even though, in doing so, he was probably going against his employer's instructions. And he told her more. He lives in New York. In any case, I'm pretty sure that the engagement story was concocted for Dubonnette's benefit, with the full cooperation of Mrs. Dubonnette!"

"Oh!" said Suzanne, dumbfounded, but delighted to discover her suspicions of Mrs. Dubonnette confirmed. "So, you're saying that Mrs. Dubonnette is a kind of agent for the unknown group that we're trying to track down! And she helped to place O'Malley in her house by providing O'Malley with a convenient cover story!"

"I never would have guessed," said Father Rudolf, his hushed tone expressing respect for the probity of Jones' conclusions. "Your Grace, you reason like a master detective! If you hadn't become a Bishop, I think you might have made a good secret agent!"

Jones and Suzanne looked at each other and smiled.

“Perhaps I’m a bit of both, Father,” replied Jones. “The Vatican needs soldiers in its army in the eternal struggle with the forces of evil. Let’s just say, I’m one of those soldiers.”

“But there is more, much more,” said Jones. “Juliette went out one afternoon with O’Malley, when he was going to meet a visiting VIP from the central organization that’s behind all this. She hid in the bushes, so she wasn’t seen. But she got a look at the man O’Malley came to see. It was from a distance, and she couldn’t describe him in detail. But one thing she said: He was wearing a Cardinal’s hat! Yes! The man who came to meet O’Malley was a Cardinal of the Church!”

“A Cardinal!?” said Suzanne and Father Rudolf in the same breath.

“Yes,” answered Jones. “And I seriously doubt the Cardinal came to Avignon just to see the pigeons perform, even though it is interesting to note that he was concerned enough about them to make a stop on his way to check them out. No, the Cardinal was here on other business, we can be sure.”

The three fell silent, watching the countryside passing smoothly by. They had come to open country, where the darkened, fenced pastures ran toward the horizon, and they could see the full moon hanging high in the cloudless sky.

After Jones emphasized to Father Rudolf the necessity of maintaining absolute secrecy about the night’s events, Jones and Suzanne said goodnight and dropped Father Rudolf at the rectory.

“Let’s drive back out to the countryside, for a bit,” said Jones. “The night is so pleasant. And I want to talk to you some more.”

Without saying a word, Suzanne, delighted, even titillated, by the prospect of parking with Jones on a quiet prospect, under the moon, on a romantic night in Provence, drove back toward an isolated spot that she had noticed on their way into town.

“Sitting here,” Suzanne said, after she had shut off the ignition and killed the lights, “you can imagine what the peasants and the Popes, the conspirators and the townspeople saw seven hundred years ago, when the Avignon Papacy began. It’s amazing how little the great, wide world really changes! And, when you think about it, what has really changed? We are still born, we grow up, we fall in love, and we try to find our way in the world! And the same moon still watches us from up there, as mysterious and indifferent as it ever was.”

“Yes,” answered Jones. “We are born, we grow up, and, in the course of things, we grow old, and we die.”

“That’s a melancholy observation,” said Suzanne, almost a little cross.

Jones was silent for a moment

“But what if we didn’t have to grow old?” asked Jones, finally. “What if we didn’t have to die? That would be a change, wouldn’t it? That would be a revolution in the world!”

“If we weren’t mortal?” asked Suzanne, with a humorless laugh. “If we didn’t die? Yes, that would change things, all right!”

“It would change everything,” said Jones. “The whole economy of human society, the give and take of human interaction, the allocations of power and distributions of wealth, not to mention the entire foundations of individual human happiness and joy, are fundamentally conditioned by the fact of age and death. If there were an end to the specter of old age and mortality, it would turn the world upside down! New institutions, even new governments would

emerge. The old world you find so little changed from the days of the Avignon Papacy would be changed at last!”

Suzanne sat silent, trying to grasp what could be behind Jones remarks. It was not like him to spin idle chatter. Was he, perhaps, finally, simply relaxing in her company, forgetting his mission for the moment, and letting his mind wander?

Somehow, eyeing his bemused, determined look, she didn’t believe it.

“All right, Bishop Kempis,” Suzanne said, “I’m beginning to get the idea that you didn’t bring me out here to make out—unfortunately! So, would you mind cluing me in on what it is you’ve been talking about for the last ten minutes?”

“OK!” laughed Jones. “It’s time I took you into my confidence. I’m going to New York tomorrow. I’m going to track down this O’Malley character and, more important, start to track down his boss, the Cardinal. And I’ve decided that you’re going with me.” He paused, adding, “If you want to go, that is.”

“Go with you to New York?” answered Suzanne. “Yes, I’d love to go! Does this mean that I’m to be told something more about your super secret mission? All I know, so far, is that it has something to do with training pigeons. Oh, and that a Cardinal is involved and that you think somebody’s conspiring, probably with the help of these local Church malcontents, to do something nasty to the Pope. Am I on target, so far?”

“Yes,” answered Jones. “You know you are. But there’s a great deal more to the story. Let me just say this, for now. The OSA is working against time to recover some stolen documents and computer files that have tremendous scientific importance. The information in this stolen material is so important that it could change the face of the world as we know it!”

“You mean,” said Suzanne, breathlessly, “it has something to do with making people live forever?”

“It does,” admitted Jones. “But the people who stole the information we’re trying to get back obviously have some private uses to which they intend to put it. We really have no idea what they want to do with it—but we’re pretty sure we won’t be very happy if they succeed in their plan!”

“Now, that’s what I call a real mission!” exclaimed Suzanne. “I finally feel like a secret agent, not just a glorified translator! Thanks, Gil, for including me. For trusting me. I won’t let you down.”

“Just a minute,” said Jones. “You have to know something else before you agree to this. Our adversaries murdered five people and kidnapped another, just to get their hands on the materials they wanted. They’re well organized, well funded, cold-blooded killers. If you come along with me, you’ll be at considerable risk. I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“Hey, maybe I’m not an ex-commando, like you, sir,” answered Suzanne, “but I didn’t join the OSA expecting safety guarantees! I’m in! I’m an agent, just like you.” She paused. “Well, maybe not, just like you. But I’m smart and brave, and I’m going to learn on the job. Count me in, I say! Did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” answered Jones. “Welcome aboard, Suzanne. And now that you’re officially part of the mission team, let me tell you the really worrisome news about our trip to New York.”

“There’s more?” said Suzanne.

“You see, I don’t believe Mrs. Dubonnette was fooled for a minute,” Jones said. “She has no idea who we are or exactly what we were doing in her house. But she knows we weren’t

there to talk about Juliette's schoolwork! As soon Dubonnette leaves for work, she'll be on the phone with a report to New York about a strange man and woman, supposedly a Bishop, who showed up out of nowhere, asking a lot of questions about O'Malley.

"And remember Mrs. Dubonnette took our snapshot when we were on our way out the door?" Jones continued. "If I'm right about her—and I am—by the time we arrive in New York, copies of that photograph will be in the hands of our enemies. They're going to be able to recognize us. Naturally, though, we won't be able to recognize them!"

"What do you suggest?" asked Suzanne. "Should we go in disguise? Try to throw them off?"

"Hardly!" answered Jones. "I'm counting on being spotted. As I said, we don't know who they are. So it would help us out considerably if they came out into the open by coming after us. But that's why I said the photograph is worrisome. We're going to become targets, you and I. Targets for proven killers." He paused. "Well, still want to play?"

"If you ask me that again," answered Suzanne, lightly digging her nails into Jones' left hand with her right, "I might just lose my head and kiss you!"

Jones, overcome by her beauty and courage and by the dark splendor and peace of the country night, a scene adrift in time, as it was, underneath the glowering moon, could hardly resist the invitation. He leaned over, took her in his arms, and gave her a long, deep, passionate kiss that left her breathless.

"That's all for now, Ms. Sebonne," said Jones, wryly, a little breathless himself, releasing Suzanne and shifting back to face forward in his seat. "I thought, sweetheart, that we'd seal our bargain with a kiss."

“You’re, you’re—” said Suzanne, grabbing onto the steering wheel, opening and closing the long, slender fingers of both hands, to steady herself, “you’re the most infuriating man I’ve ever met!” She paused, then continued, “But, I like you, anyway. You haven’t seen the last of me, Major Jones, sir! I personally guarantee it!”